222

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Gilbert Frankau is a contributor to "Hutchinson's Magazine."

MASTERSON:

A Story of an English Gentleman

By GILBERT FRANKAU

GOVT GIRLS COLLEGE
222

LONDON:
HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers), LTD.
PATERNOSTER ROW

acc. no: 222

TO MY DEAR FRIEND, EVELEIGH NASH, who, being my friend, understands that the one reason why I have introduced certain controversial topics—and one particularly controversial character, Irene Carslake—into this tale, is because, throughout it, I have tried to seek truth.

PART ONE

Masterson

A Story of an English Gentleman

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

OUTSIDE, beyond the plaited grass of the sun-blinds, the flower-gardens of the British Legation at Addis Ababa rioted rose-pink and hibiscus-red and iris-purple in the late heat of an Abyssinian afternoon. Within, alone at the rough ebony table of his bare untidy workroom, John Masterson chewed hard on the stem of his unlit pipe while he re-read, for the fiftieth time since tiffin, that long crisply-phrased letter signed, " Yours very truly, James Haringford."

A perfectly normal Englishman, this John Masterson! Sound of mind and sound of body. Slow to anger and deliberate in action. Not quick to perceive, yet never quite lacking in perception. Not over-imaginative, yet not wholly devoid of imagination. A man of quiet commonsense rather than of flashing talent, of plodding purpose rather than of sudden intuition. A man of the open spaces, of blue seas, and brown deserts, and green prairies: a man to whom these unbought things were worth more than all the gold of a millionaire.

An Englishman of the open spaces! His frame, perhaps just a trifle too broad for the five-foot-ten of his well-carried height; his chest, powerful under the tussore shirt, unfastened at the collar to reveal a triangle of white, tough-sinewed neck; his hands, big, and healthy of nail; his muscled legs, over-thick for grace in their worn drill breeches and worn tan riding-boots; his face, leathered by the Ethiopian sun, the mark of the " solah-topee " pale across its rugged forehead; the high determined cheek-bones and the full easy-going jowl; the shock of brown, not over-tidy hair; and the big unclipped

moustache down-curling from the strong well-cut nose—all these revealed something of brains but more of character, the essential normality of our overseas breed.

Yet to-day, as he finally laid down Haringford's letter, and found matches to kindle his pipe, there was something considerably abnormal both about the situation and the emotions of this same John Masterson.

The pipe lit, and re-clenched between firm teeth, his right hand—a habit of his—began tugging at his moustache; while in his eyes, eyes of that pale, peculiar, far-away blue one associates with sea and desert, there shewed bewilderment, and indecision, and almost— though to the average man, whether of English or of any other race, there could have been nothing fearful in those phrases of clean typescript—Fear.

"I thank you for your cable," ran those phrases, "yet beg of you to reconsider your decision. Believe me, my dear John, whether you like it or not, you ought to return to England. As residuary legatee and sole executor of so considerable an estate, you cannot possibly handle the manifold business transactions which are inevitably connected with it from the wilds of your hermitage in Abyssinia. Moreover, it was your father's wish, expressed to me practically on his death-bed, that you should take up your inheritance in person. So that the question of your return becomes, if I may be allowed the liberty of saying so, not so much one of inclination as of family duty."

And, "Duty," thought John Masterson. "Duty! But haven't I duties here?"

The thought summed up most of his trouble; and presently —once more tugging at his moustache—he started in to revisualize the whole chain of untoward events which had brought that trouble, and the inheritance of his father's money, upon him.

"Funny," went on his thoughts. "Funny!"

And certainly it did seem funny—if it weren't for the tragedy of it—that they should all have died, and all without male issue, all those five elder brothers whose lives had once stood between him and the "old man's" fortune.

Take Charlie, for instance, gay Charlie with his love for the flesh-pots and his gay young wife and his two gay little daughters! Why should a Boche shell have got Charlie—Charlie of all people —the very first day he went over the top below Hill Sixty?

Foolish to ask that question, of course! As foolish as asking why a Turkish rifle had put its bullet through Bobbie's—bachelor Bobbie's—heart, that night on the red beaches at Gallipoli;

or why David—solemn old David—should have gone down to his death, and a thousand with him, in the gray waters of the Skager-Rack.

"War's war, of course," mused John Masterson. "Still, it was bad luck, rotten bad luck, that it should have taken the three of them."

Yet, even so, the War had left Hector and Martin. *They* hadn't met their deaths in action; but uselessly, barely a month before the "old man" had made that last will and testament of his, amid the flaming wreckage of the London-Buda mail-plane as it crashed to rock among the Alpine gorges.

And, "Poor old governor," mused John Masterson. "Poor old governor! I bet it was that last shock which killed him. He liked Hector better than any of us; and a man doesn't get over that kind of thing when he's ninety-four."

Still, it did seem funny—a regular trick of some malicious fate—that neither Hector nor Martin, the one with three children and the other with four, should have succeeded in producing the man grandchild of his father's desire.

§ 2

Outside, beyond the plaited grass of the sun-blinds, the Abyssinian afternoon already tempered its heat. But within, John Masterson still sat pensive.

"I'm forty," he was thinking. "And at forty a man doesn't change."

After all, *was* it his duty to go back—even temporarily—to England? Didn't his duty lie here? Here in Ethiopia—here in this older, yet newer, land whose brown rulers were so eager for guidance, so anxious to learn what little an Englishman could teach them of English hygiene, and of English order, and of all those simpler blessings which careless home-folk, the folk of the paved streets and the made drainage and the unarmed constables, took for their granted right—with never a landowner and never a priest and never a politician to say them, "Nay."

At which exact point in John Masterson's deliberations, he was disturbed by the customary altercation, conducted in shrillest Amharic, between Yasu, one of his Gourage stable-boys, and Menelik, his Abyssinian body-servant.

"Dog," Menelik was shouting. "Dog of a dung-carrier, I tell thee that my red man did not order the horse, Rover, for this afternoon. He ordered the black horse and that saddle which was given to him by the Captain Farrar."

"Thou liest," replied Yasu. "May thy grandfather's head bear witness that the truth is not in thee. Only this forenoon, the red man ordered him Rover and the saddle which thou seest upon her."

The "red man" in question listened, not without amusement, for several seconds. Then, rising from his table, he parted the sun-blinds; and called, also in Amharic, "Menelik, Menelik! Be silent, and come hither."

The African back-chat ceased at Masterson's call; and, a minute or so later, Menelik—tall in the white toga-like *chamma* of his race, his black frizzy hair gleaming with *ghi*, his brown face sweating and the anger of the altercation still in his brown eyes—came swiftly into the room.

"All Gourages are fools and the sons of fools," began Menelik; and was just about to launch into one of his usual tirades against that strange, pale, semi-European race who serve the conquering Abyssinians as hewers of wood and drawers of water, when Masterson cut him short with a calm, "Yasu speaks truth. I changed the orders whilst thou wast sleeping. Bring sun-hat and riding-whip; and give me yon coat upon the wall."

Menelik, in no wise abashed at his own defeat, obeyed the orders; and almost immediately Masterson—Haringford's letter bulging one capacious pocket of his loose red-lined shooting jacket—was striding out of his workroom, his riding-boots creaking a little as they trod the wide matting-floored corridor, into open air.

It was still the hour of the siesta. Above him, as he issued from the long, low, tile-roofed house of the Legation, the Ethiopian sky had not yet changed its flawless sapphire. Parrots were chattering among the garden-bushes. A bright green thrush hopped gaily across the drive where Rover, his gray Gojam pony, whinnied to him as she pawed the dust. Huge butterflies, swallow-tailed and sapphire as the sky, were fluttering about the rose-trees. On his perch by the mud tennis-court, "Galla Boy," Mrs. Frankie's white marabout, had not yet raised his bill from his breast-feathers. But already, as the pale-skinned Yasu, grinning a little at his victory over Menelik, brought Rover to the porch, the tiniest of breezes was ruffling the leaves of the eucalyptus avenue; and Masterson, mounting cleverly for so thick-set a man, knew it for the forerunner of the evening cool.

"Are thy children well, Yasu?" he asked, tightening his topee-strap under his chin and gathering the bridle-reins in his other hand.

"Aye, Master. Thanks to the medicine thou did'st give them, my children are well."

"It is good, Yasu. I return at dusk. See that thou art waiting for me. And let go her head."

Whereupon the gray pony, hogging her back and tossing at her snaffle, went off at a hand-canter down the drive.

§ 3

Just for a moment or so, Masterson, busy with the antics of his steed, lost sight of his trouble. A hundred yards, however, sufficed for Rover's subduing; and as the pair of them came at the customary jig-jog past the saluting Sowars at the gateway, and beyond them into that great plain which separates the leafy Legation quarter of Addis Ababa from the leafy town, his mind restarted its perturbing deliberations.

"Confound it," he deliberated. "Confound it! I won't leave the place."

For now the magic of this place was full on Masterson; and, pulling to a walk, he rode, as men mazed with magic do ride, very slowly, his eyes far to the south where Mount Zequala rose in sun-bathed glory against the limitless African blue.

Aye! Magic. The spell of an adopted country, of the land which sheer inclination, and no mere accident of birth, has made one's own. If ever it came upon a man, it came upon John Masterson then, as he rode—slowly, slowly, slowly—by the dusty polo-ground and the deserted race-track, his eyes on the trees and the mountains, his mind on the work which his heart had given him, towards the heart of that town which the Emperor Menelik, newly flushed with victory, christened, in the days when John Masterson was still a fag at Eton, "The City of the New Flower."

It seemed so far away that other, tamer land beyond the mountains. Riding, always riding; where the red dogs snarled at one from the red-brown dust-heaps, and the mud-brown children, naked even of loin-cloth, shouted "*Alamé, Alamé,*" to Rover's hoof-beats; where here a noble dressed in gold and lion's mane, stirrup between toes, trotted dignified a-muleback; and there a Falasha, hook-nosed and evil-eyed, spat upon the ground while he trudged towards the ranges—riding, always riding, with one's mind upon one's life-work, how could one concentrate one's brain upon that England.

The little rhythm of poetic thought continued; and presently, the magic still on him, Masterson began to remember,

not blurredly as men remember little pleasures, but vividly as one who re-lives some great crisis in his life, his very first afternoon in Addis—that afternoon when, hot, and tired, and, truth to tell, a little disgruntled after that long railway climb from Dirre Daoua to the Entoto tableland, he had sought what shelter the casual traveller may find in the bare, echoing, bug-infested rooms of the Hotel Imperial; and thence, having bathed away the dust of his journey, looked out for the first time from his wide verandah on to the dark-green gum-trees and the white stone buildings and the grass-roofed *tukuls* and the plains and the river-banks and the crop-lands and the mountains of this unknown Ethiopia.

"I knew that afternoon," he muttered to himself.

But that afternoon, nearly seven years ago now, he had not really known. Full knowledge—understanding that he had found, here in this place of all earth-places he had roamed, his life-work—had only come to him, months later, after his trek among the jungles and the rock-roads of the Arussi mountains; that long, long trek with the tired mules sweating under their gaudy harness, and the *Gallas* cursing under their heavy head-loads, and the camp-fires gleaming against the rocks o'night-times, and the ashes of the camp-fires gray of a morning, "Gray and gray of a jungle-morning, when monkeys signalled the *safari's* passing."

"Idiot," muttered the riding Masterson. "Idiot. This isn't the moment for quoting verses."

Nevertheless, the poetic mood persisted; till, after a little while, he began to re-visualize how he had first taken up this life-work—his chance meeting with Frankie Farrar, with Ras Tafari, the Regent, with the Regent's quaint Council of bearded brown-skinned priests and soldiers; and his subsequent interview with Zauditu, the queer chubby-featured chubby-handed Empress of this queer race which, fighting-men for three thousand years, had only been defeated by the fighting-men of his own. "Help us," they had asked. "Help us in our tasks of government." And now—now after seven years of fruitful labour—Haringford wanted him to desert them.

"It can't be done," he decided, the poetry petering out of him. "It simply can't be done."

Already, slowly though Rover had picked her way across the roadless plain, horse and rider were almost into Addis. Here, too, the pony's hoofs found no roads, only the mockeries of them—a hundred yards of unrolled Macadam disappearing in a waterless watercourse, a track beaten by human feet across a clearing

between the gum-trees, a remnant of hewn stone causeway long ago abandoned by its Gourage builders.

"If only I could make these people work," thought Masterson, drawing rein for a moment. "If only I could make 'em work as well as they plan." Then, closing his thick legs on the pony's tubby flanks, he pressed her to an amble, and went on towards the centre of the straggling hill-side town.

There were more naked children now; children who shouted after him, "*Abaté zukar! Abaté zukar!*" as he trotted by; more red dogs, snarling mangily from their couches in the dust; more cloaked and solemn nobles, riding a-muleback, followed by their retinues of savage riflemen; more humble folk trudging slowly from market, their Austrian dollars safely wrapped in their *chammas*, their amulets clinking on their brown necks, their braceleted women following behind.

And presently, houses—some stone-built after the European fashion but roofed with the eternal corrugated iron, some of stone and mud, with uncouth weirdly painted sloping eaves, and some mere native *tukuls*, grass-thatched after the older manner, with lean sheep grazing at their doorways and lean fowls clucking among the débris of their uncarted refuse—began to appear among the rocks and the eucalyptus-trees which hedged his way.

"If only one could teach them sanitation," continued Masterson's thoughts. "If only one could teach them to keep the place clean."

The little mood of annoyance, however, passed as he rode forward, Rover perforce at walk, till he came, over a hump in the rocky ground, on the fine house of that High Priest whom Ethiopia calls "The Abouna," and past it, rounding the new American Hospital, Stars and Stripes flaunting over its iron roof, into the Market Place.

In the Market Place, the day's work was almost over. The pepper-sellers and the basket-weavers had departed. *Galla* peasants, filthy in their worn rags, leaned wearily on their spears to watch their black women and blacker children re-load their scraggy donkeys for the farm. At the heaped stones of the uncovered selling-booths only a few olive-faced Shoan hucksters still gesticulated angrily at their poorer customers, haggling to the ultimate *guerche* over the last of the honey or the *ghi*. No uniformed officials were to be seen about the dilapidated Customs' sheds. Everywhere, the busy hum of morning had died down to that drone which precedes the night.

Yet the immense red-earthed quadrilateral still teemed with

life. Here, where the dung-fires smouldered, mules bit and jostled for the water-sacks. There, a group of the Regent's soldiery, rifles piled and cartridge-belts loosened, squatted on their haunches round a giant earthenware *gombo* of native beer, tearing with reddened teeth at the red entrails of a newly-slaughtered ram.

Here, a Levantine trader, greasy of face and avaricious of eye, fingered with cunning hand at a pile of unsold carpets. There, yet others of the same Asiatic breed brooded, fatly content with their day's trading, over dwindled piles of Manchester cotton goods or native *abougedid* or the cheap jewellery of English Birmingham. While yonder, clustered round the single tree which marks the centre of that enormous square, a few camels from Somaliland were kneeling to be measured for their loads of gum and ostrich feathers; and farther still, away beyond the camels and the single tree, ominous against the saffron verandahs of the low houses and the dark green foliage above them, rose the poles and cross-bar of Abyssinian justice, from which, both arms broken behind its back by the brutal pinions, the corpse of Melekot, the highwayman, still dangled, white-trousered and white-tunic'd as in life, swinging grotesquely to the risen breeze.

All Ethiopia was in that scene and in the vultures circling above; and for a long while John Masterson, motionless on his motionless pony, the topee pushed back from his broad forehead and his whip-lash trailing the dust, halted to watch it. Till, watching, his thoughts raced—raced back to the thousand other townships he had seen—townships of the prairie and the jungle, of the sea-marge and the Karroo; to Joh'burg, loud with its trams and its motor-cars; to Auckland, quiet by its jewelled ocean; to Ipoh, lost among its tin-mines and its rubber plantations; to Calgary and Punta Arenas, and Bogota of the Columbians, and Lima of Peru.

"Why this town?" he thought suddenly. "Why should this town, most savage of them all, claim me for its own?"

Then a black thief, handless, cringed through the dust to Rover's very fetlocks; and abruptly, as that black thief raised both wrists to show the still-livid sear-marks of the boiling fat into which his torturers had plunged them, whining while he did so, "O *Frangi*, friend of our Ras and Empress, must these things be in Zauditu's Ethiopia?" John Masterson realized to the full his own desire for serving the less fortunate of his fellow-creatures: that desire which—at once the essence of all true charity and of all great statesmanship—was the very key-note of his soul.

CHAPTER TWO

§ 1

TWILIGHT, the sudden twilight of equatorial Africa, fell swiftly as John Masterson cantered home towards the Legation. Already the clear sapphire of the sky had deepened to sapphire-matrix. Already, far to the west, the gold lacquer of the sun touched the black lacquer of the mountain-tops till all the roadless plain glimmered as with saffron fire.

And now, as the sun-rim met the mountain-rim, both glowed scarlet—that same blood-scarlet which tinged the knives of the Emperor Menelik's men when they fell upon the men of Italy at Adowa. And now, suddenly, as the shadow of horse and rider lengthened behind Rover's cantering hoofs, and the shadows of the ranges blotted out the shadows of the rocks and the gum-trees and all other shadows on that roadless shadowy plain, the black lacquer of the mountain-tops swallowed the last gold lacquer of the sunset; and, above the mountain-tops, the sapphire-matrix of the sky darkened to deepest indigo, while below them the high crags were bands of rose-madder and sepia-brown and red-purple against the full bronze splendour of the Ethiopian dusk.

And now, thoughtfully, when Rover would have quickened to a stretch-gallop along the race-track, John Masterson halted again.

Behind him, as he turned in his saddle, he could just see the roofs of Addis, targets of flaring copper against the dark-green gun-metal background of the woods. From the distant *Gebbi*, where torches had begun to burn above the gate-towers, came the beat of drums, shouting, the roar of the caged lions and the high wail of an Abyssinian lyre. Somewhere, a hyena was snarling. Somewhere, a whip cracked and a dog barked as its peasant-master goaded home his oxen for the night.

"What can one do?" thought Masterson. "What can one do to help these people?"

For his recollection of the cringing thief was still vivid ; and as, darkness falling, he turned his back on the *Gebbi* and walked his pony home, there fell on him that mood of despairful brooding which only those who have laboured to serve the older races can surely know.

Ethiopia, however much a man might plan or hope for it, would always be Ethiopia. The coming of Judaism, the coming of Christianity, even the coming of the telephone and the cinema —none of these had changed its essential savagery. The old rites, the old customs, still held. On its borders, the raider still disembowelled the raided and carried off their women into slavery. Even here in Addis was slavery—slavery, and those same gallows which had hanged Haman aforetime, and the hand-lopping knife and the branding-iron and the wired whip-lash for the thief.

Nor could anything he, a mere *Frangi*, might do, nor any argument he might adduce before that quaint council of bearded brown-skinned men, alter—even by one jot or one tittle—that age-old slavery and those age-old penalties ; because, here in the land to which Queen Makeda the Sheban returned, heavy with Solomon ben Daoud's child, to found that dynasty which rules over it to this day, " the red man " was still the brown man's servant, not even his equal in the sight of the Law.

That mood of despair passed ; but presently, as Masterson returned to the Legation, it fell on him again. Dismounting, patting Rover's muzzle, handing her over to Yasu, striding to his bare matchboarded bedroom where Menelik had already lit the oil-lamp and laid out his soft evening shirt and old smoking-jacket on the plain brass bed, there seemed no more certainty in this life-work he had chosen, no real reason why he should not return—temporarily at any rate—to the country of his birth.

" Nonsense," he told himself. " Nonsense ! My work lies here."

Nevertheless, home-thoughts were rising in him ; and after a while, as he passed to his bathroom and began sluicing his shoulders with the chilly water from the big earthenware *gombo*, he began to see—as only an Englishman many years exiled from England can see—pictures of the Old Country : of London gloomy in fog or gay with sunshine ; of spring-time at Mastersleigh ; of the Solent, with his father's steam-yacht riding at anchor ; of the Dover cliffs and the Kentish hop-fields and the ridge-and-furrow of Midland shires.

§ 2

John Masterson was just stuffing pipe and tobacco-pouch into the pockets of his smoking-jacket, when peremptory knuckles rapped on the thin door-panels and a peremptory voice called through them: "John! Are you there, John? Can I come in?" when, without waiting for an answer to his questions, Frankie Farrar, also dressed for dinner, came quickly into the room.

"You're a nice chap," went on the newcomer, a hard-bitten little man with a tight-skinned ferrety face, a small reddish moustache, and the cool eyes of the professional soldier. "What about our tennis? You'll get it when Mrs. F. comes down to dinner."

"Sorry, Frank," apologized Masterson. "But I forgot all about the tennis. As a matter of fact, I've been a bit harassed this afternoon."

"Harassed?" queried the other, purloining a cigarette from the tin on his friend's dressing-table. "What about?"

"Oh, nothing. That's to say nothing in particular."

"Well—I've no doubt the Missus will forgive you. Been having a pow-wow with the Ras, I suppose?"

"No. I went for a ride."

The little red major of West African Rifles, seconded some years back for special service in Abyssinia, understood better than to press for further confidences. Curious to learn what Masterson intended doing now that he had "come into a bit of money from his governor," he realized, knowing his man, that "old John" would only reveal those intentions in his own good time.

"Reticent bloke is our John," mused Frankie Farrar, as the bronze gong picked up by his wife in Harrar market-place sounding musically for dinner—the pair of them made their way out of Masterson's apartments, down various oil-lit corridors, into the big tiffin-room.

The French windows at the far end of the tiffin-room had not yet been shuttered. Beyond the close-meshed muslin curtains, the African moon was just rising, hugely silver, above the dark of the gardens. A big lamp hung from the high lime-washed ceiling. Round the candle-lit table, laid for five, Abyssinian servants, bare-footed, in their tight linen trousers and loose white tunics, already stood to attention. At the sideboard, an Indian khitmatgar busied brown hands with the whiskey decanter, jugs and soda-water bottles. But no Indian punkah fanned the scene;

because the nights on the Entoto tableland are cool as September nights at home.

" We're the first, as usual," pronounced Farrar, approaching the sideboard. " What about a mild peg ? "

" Thanks. A *chota* peg's just what I need, Frank."

The khitmatgar, smiling into his beard (for the little ceremony was a nightly one), mixed the mild drinks ; and the two friends were still sipping at them when Farrar's spouse, followed by Fairclough, the tall clean-shaven Minister, and Saunders, his young Scottish secretary, entered the tiffin-room.

" I've got a bone to pick with you, John," began the big, square-shouldered, horsy-faced woman in the out-of-date white evening-dress, whom the entire Legation regarded as its temporal head. " In fact I've got two bones to pick with you. When a man lives in a Heaven-forsaken hole like Addis Ababa, his first duty is to be sociable ; and his second "—Mrs. Farrar's black eyes twinkled in mock flirtatiousness—" is not to disappoint his friend's wife."

" A most improper remark," commented Fairclough as they sat down.

The meal—some imported sardines, a native soup flavoured with chilis, the inevitable chicken with the garden peas which were Mrs. Frankie's especial pride, and a pumpkin pie followed by a big silver dish of bananas, grapes, and pomegranates—passed pleasantly enough. Talk, as always, wavered between local sport and local " shop."

The first secretary of the French Legation, announced Mrs. Frankie, had just had a batch of new polo ponies sent up from the country. Of these, the worst were for sale. Monsieur Chefneu was threatening to retire if Ras Tafari would not present the gold cup at next week's race meeting. The Americans—said Saunders—were on the verge of securing another oil-boring concession, " This time, in the neighbourhood of Gondar." Two more commercial travellers, and a mysterious individual with a blue beard and green glasses, whose passport stated him to be an archæologist bent on deciphering the Himyaritic inscriptions on the monoliths at Axum, had arrived at Djibouti from Hamburg, and were being held up at Dirre Daoua pending identification.

" These infernal Huns," rasped Farrar, as Saunders imparted that last information. " They'll snaffle the whole trade of the country, and most of the museum pieces into the bargain, before they've done. *Our* people haven't even got the *nous* to send one commercial traveller, let alone a brace."

"Oh, we all know England's gone to the demnition bow-wows since you were seconded to the Foreign Office," remarked the cynical Fairclough. "Why don't you become a naturalized Somali and have done with it?"

Meanwhile Masterson, his mind still set on its own problem, contented himself with a few monosyllabic comments. Even when the port decanter began to circulate, and the spoons clinked against the coffee-cups, and the aroma of Fairclough's imported cigars mingled with the cloying perfume of the pomegranates, he found conversation more than usually difficult. For the first time in seven years, it seemed to him that this particular atmosphere had lost its charm. Watching now one and now another of his fellow-diners, watching the moon as she rose beyond the windows, watching the servants as they cleared away the fruit plates, his thoughts wandered—wandered towards home.

"You certainly are the strong, silent man to-night, my friend," Mrs. Farrar chaffed him when—her own cigarette finished, and her Minister duly reminded not to linger too long over his cigar—she departed for the drawing-room.

Masterson's thoughts, however, continued to obsess him; till presently, Saunders leaving them for a moment, Fairclough and Farrar resumed their never-ending argument about "the state of things in the Old Country."

"You can take it from me," began Farrar, patterning the table-cloth with square thumb-nail, "that the Old Country's breaking up. As a race, we English are almost done. The British Empire may last another fifty, or possibly another hundred, years. But that's about the limit of it. We're in the same condition Rome was under the Byzantine Cæsars. Dry-rot's setting in. The last time I was home I could almost smell it."

"Rubbish!" countered Fairclough. "Utter rubbish! The British Empire's been breaking up ever since I can remember. What *you* need is a dose of salts."

"What England needs"—Farrar's gray eyes did not acknowledge the thrust—"is a few honest men. What with the Socialists telling one lie and the profiteers another, and everyone else in the place refusing to do a decent day's job for a decent day's wage, the end's inevitable."

"Words, my dear fellow. Words!"

The wrangle, inevitable as the chili soup and chicken which had preceded it, went on to the inevitable crescendo.

"I tell you," proclaimed Farrar, "that nobody in England gives a tinker's damn for the Empire. Ireland's gone already—except for Ulster, and the politicians'll betray Ulster as soon as

ever they get a chance. India—thanks to Messrs. Montague, Nontague and Co.—is just about ripe for another mutiny. If Smuts loses the next South African election, we can kiss the Rand good-bye. Canada'll go Yank the moment it pays her to. And Australia——"

"Australia, needless to say," concluded the unmoved Fairclough, "will be annexed by the King of the Cannibal Islands. Meanwhile, though, don't you think we might enjoy one last rubber of bridge?"

§ 3

In the long, rather chilly drawing-room, furnished after the heterogeneous fashion of apartments whose outgoing inmates sell their unwanted "sticks" to the incoming exile (and so *ad infinitum*), servants had set out the fretted ebony bridge-table between the two standard oil-lamps; and at it, patience-packs in front of her, sat Mrs. Frankie.

"Three quarters of an hour!" proclaimed Mrs. Frankie. "I've played two Canfields and one Devil. Got the Devil out, too. What kept you—stories?"

"No! The Decline and Fall of the British Empire," explained Fairclough. "A series of lectures by Francis Farrar, sometime a Major in the King's West African Rifles."

"Oh, Frank doesn't believe half he says," laughed Mrs. Frankie, changing patience-cards for bridge-cards, and cutting Masterson out of the first rubber. "He wouldn't be a soldier if he didn't like a good grouse. No trumps, your Excellency. And I'll thank you not to double."

The four went at their game, and Masterson, not sorry to be out of it, sat down to a detective story. But to-night the atmosphere of the detective story, as the atmosphere of the Legation, failed to charm; and after half a chapter he put down the book and returned to thought.

At last, the rubber—a protracted one—finished; and, cutting in, he managed, for the next half-hour or so, to concentrate his not very quick brain on the intricacies of the play. Subconsciously, however, his mind was still on its problem.

"Supposing," argued his subconscious mind, "that Frank's right about the Empire, and Fairclough's wrong. In that case where does an Englishman's duty lie—in a country that belongs to foreigners, or in his own?"

"I'll talk things over with Frank," he decided suddenly. "It may help me to see where I stand."

§ 4

To Frankie Farrar, essentially a regular soldier, with all the regular soldier's essential simplicity of outlook, his pal, John Masterson, had always been a bit of a puzzle.

That a man of leisure, with neither kith nor kin nor wife dependent on him, should drift out—the Great War at an end—on a big-game shooting expedition to Abyssinia, was understandable enough. But that that same man should choose to exile himself, apparently for the rest of his life, in the one country in the world where the white man ranked lower than the native; that he should work harder than any native, first at the acquisition of the difficult Amharic language, and then, Amharic acquired, as the unsalaried and (at least in Fairclough's estimation) rather troublesome adviser of a despotic foreign Government—these things seemed to make "old John" the kind of psychological problem which no amount of a poor soldier's rule-of-thumb reasoning could hope to solve.

Mrs. Frankie, needless to say, being a woman at heart for all her outward manliness, had solved the problem—some years ago now—in the usual womanly way. "Some girl at home must have thrown him over," Mrs. Frankie had decided. "Nothing else'd keep a man all these years in Addis Ababa." But to-night, as Mrs. Frankie's husband settled himself in the Willesden canvas chair of his friend's workroom, and, lighting a last cheroot, considered the set, rather stern face which confronted him across the table, that solution of the problem seemed more than ever ridiculous.

"Old chap," began his friend, puffing solemnly at his pipe, "I'm in the devil's own difficulty. The more I think about it, the less I know what is the right thing to be done about the governor's money. Haringford's written. *He* says I ought to go home. But the trouble is that I don't want to go home. I've always been a rolling stone, you see. Even as a kid I couldn't stick being in one place for more than about a month."

"But you've stuck Abyssinia for the last seven years," interrupted the puzzled Farrar. "So I don't understand——"

"I know you don't understand, Frank." Masterson laughed—a shy kind of laugh that explained nothing. "No more do I. At least, not quite. Only, somehow or other . . ."

The big man at the table fell silent, wrestling against his usual disability for self-expression; and, watching him in equal silence, the little man in the chair suddenly realized that he loved this curiously unconfidential friend of his with that love which only

one self-reliant man, marooned in the earth's waste places, can conceive for another.

"I don't know what I'll do with myself if old John does go home," mused the little man, gulping a great mouthful of cheroot smoke. "Take to drink, I expect—or chuck Africa for good."

Meanwhile, Masterson, unaware of his friend's emotions, continued to struggle with his own.

"Somehow or other," he repeated, "somehow or other, Frank, the mere idea of leaving Addis—even temporarily—gives me the confounded hump. I don't know whether I'm doing any good here or whether I'm not. Sometimes I think the Ras and those priests of his don't give a tinker's curse for anything I tell 'em; and sometimes—you'll call me an idiot, I suppose—I shudder to imagine where they'd be without me. Take the Railway alone. Next year, if only we can get that British director——"

"But the Railway's a joke," interpolated Farrar. "When the Dankali don't snaffle the signal wires to make bracelets and stop the traffic altogether, our pal the Regent holds up the express for a three hours' *shikar* because he happens to have seen a brace of lions or a leash of leopards from his saloon window."

"Oh, I agree that the Franco-Ethiopian isn't the London, Midland and Scottish," admitted Masterson. "Still, it isn't quite as bad as all that."

The big man, still shirking his main issue, talked slowly on; and, presently, listening without comment, the little man's emotions underwent the faintest change. So John—poor old John—really did get some satisfaction out of this crazy country and its crazy rulers. Well! Well! Every man to his taste. Give him—Frankie Farrar—London!

"By the way," he interpolated again, "you haven't told me how much your governor actually left."

"I haven't the faintest idea." Masterson laughed another of his shy, non-explanatory laughs. "Not that it makes any difference if he left half a million. You see, Frank, by the time a chap who has had a bit of money all his life gets to my age, money doesn't really count. What really counts is doing what one likes. And I like Abyssinia. That's what makes things so jolly difficult to decide. One can't always follow one's bent, you see, and if, if"—stumblingly, 'old John' came to that main issue—"if what you were saying about England to-night, if what you've been saying ever since you got back from your last leave, is half-true, why then perhaps Haringford's right and I really ought to go home for good. I'm not saying that out of vanity

hushed the thunder of their roaring. Only here in the garden was sound—the whir of a hawk-moth among the flowers, the croak of a frog, the chirp of a hammer-bird calling to her mate. And presently it seemed to Masterson that these sounds, too, died away, leaving him alone with that vague uncomprehended Power which is the inner conscience of a man.

For a long while he stood there ; silent ; self-absorbed ; the scent of the roses and the lilies cool in his nostrils ; the night-air cool on his forehead ; all his faculties, except that one faculty of conscience, at rest. Then, very slowly, once more moving as a sleep-walker moves, he turned away from the serenity of the garden ; and, passing back through the open windows, knelt him down—a figure half saintly and half grotesque in the silver-streaming moonlight—to pray.

" God," prayed Masterson, kneeling on the bare floor by his plain brass bed, " shew me my duty plain."

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

If ever a line of classical poetry applied to the psychological situation of a modern man, that line which runs, "They change their skies above them, but not their hearts who roam," applied to the psychological situation of John Masterson, as he woke from an uncomfortable doze in the over-heated Pullman to find the strike-delayed Folkestone boat-train at last running out of the frost-bound countryside into the thin fog of Greater London.

Casting his memory backwards, while his eyes opened to reveal the mahogany-panelled compartment, the elegantly-dressed foreigner who faced him across the small glass-topped table, and the little brass-edged bar-counter under the brass-edged railway-clock beyond, it seemed to him that every single happening since his decision to return had occurred in one simultaneous flash of that infinite dimension which the finite mind calls, Time.

In that moment of waking, he could hardly believe that he had really left Abyssinia; had actually taken that first uncomfortable journey from Addis Ababa to the mosquito-haunted rest-house at Hawash, and flourishing Dirre Daoua, and the fortress-guarded frontier station of Daounlé; that he had ever travelled from barren Djibouti, over sapphire seas where the last of the sun went out in a quick green flame behind the steamer's league-long smoke-plume, to an even barrener Aden; and on from Aden by Perim headland; and on from Perim, through the shimmering heat-hazes and the rolling sand-dunes of the Canal, to where the lights of Ismailia town gleamed silver across the black-steel waters of Ismailia lake; and on from Ismailia to Port Said with its banjoes tinkling the tunes of home; and on from Port Said through the quiet straits of Italian Messina to the loud sun-warmed wharves of French Marseilles.

Only his body—it seemed to him—had travelled that slow sea-route and the quick European railway-route which followed

it and the last narrow channel between him and England. Mentally—it seemed to him—he was still in Addis; still concluding that last interview with Ras Tafari; still awaiting Zauditu's pleasure among her rifled soldiery in the courtyard of the *Gebbi*; still drinking those last farewell toasts in the big tiffin-room of the Legation; still talking with Frankie Farrar while they awaited in the heat and hubbub of the crowded platform the long-delayed departure of the coast-bound mail.

"You'll like London all right when you get there," Frankie Farrar had said. All very well that, for Frankie!

A different voice, and the round face of the uniformed conductor, saying, "We'll be in in a little more than ten minutes now, sir. Shall I find you a porter when we get to Charing Cross?" recalled Masterson sharply to the present. Thanking the man, and tipping him a modest sixpence, he rose—a big, somewhat clumsy figure in his one worn suit of European homespun; apologised to the foreigner opposite; collected his ebony stick, his shabby green hat and his out-of-date ulster from the rack; put on the ulster, and, sitting down again, drew up the window-blind.

Already, peering out through the misted pane, he could see lights springing at him out of the fog; picture after serried picture of massed dwelling-houses, with here a factory blurring by, and there a deep canyon of tram-clanging street glittering into focus, glittering out again as more and more and yet more houses closed in upon the train.

"Horrible," he thought. "Horrible."

At last, the dwelling-houses opened out and a long hoarding of posters swung into view. Opposite this hoarding, the train, by now nearly at its destination, came almost to a standstill.

"Ugly," went on Masterson's thoughts. "Damned ugly."

All the same, since anything was better than thought, he began an aimless study of the posters; and presently one of them—a particularly daring conception of modern womanhood, splashed in scarlet and orange against a peacock-blue background, with "Templeton's Wife" printed in enormous letters above, and underneath, in almost equally large letters, "A Play by Adrian Rose"—recalled a memory of his boyhood.

Hadn't there been a Rose—an Adrian Rose—at his tutor's? Of course there had. Curious sort of chap. Jew. Frightfully keen on the theatre, too. Funny if he had taken to writing plays.

The locomotive jerked on before Masterson's recollection could further materialize; and abruptly, as it came upon the slums of Thameside South, all the anticipated depression of

home-coming had him in its grip. He felt that he hated this London ; felt that he would always go on hating it, that no power on earth would ever persuade him to remain in England for one moment longer than might be absolutely necessary for the settlement of his affairs.

" We'll go back," he decided, rising again as Thameside South clanked past. " Yes, by Jove. As soon as ever I can get this job done, Menelik and I'll go back."

§ 2

That mood of full depression, that itch to escape back from London into the wide spaces of equatorial Africa, still possessed John Masterson's soul as the slums of Thameside South gave way to the light-fringed sweep of the Thames itself, and the hazy outlines of the Houses of Parliament, with Big Ben, its giant hands already pointing to ten minutes past nine, towering high and ghostly above them.

But, as the boat-train halted alongside the platform, and, stepping out of it, he received his battered be-labelled Gladstone from the hands of the attendant, he experienced—for the first time since leaving Addis—one tiny thrill at the thought of being " home."

Charing Cross Station, bright and bustling under the arc-lamps of a January evening, made such a contrast with the terminus at Addis Ababa. There, all would have been toil and turmoil, shouting and disorganization. Here—strike or no strike—everything was quiet and orderly, efficient and organized. Here, too, something—could it be the remembered smell of smoke and train-oil, or the voice of the obliging porter who asked, taking charge of his Gladstone, " Is there anything in the van, sir ? " or perhaps the incongruity of Menelik's appearance as he approached, shivering in his white *chamma*, through the curious knot of passengers round the door of the Pullman ?—carried the sharp conviction that he, John Masterson, belonged to this country ; that this country, whether he liked it or no, belonged to him.

And that tiny thrill—while Menelik, who had at last won to his side, was muttering apprehensions lest the " Gourage with the red tie " should make away with his " *Frangi's* baggage-tickutt " —was still with Masterson, when he perceived his family solicitor, the inevitable top-hat on his head, signalling to him with lifted umbrella above the heads of the crowd.

"I thought it must be you," remarked James Haringford, a tall distinguished-looking person in the middle sixties, clean-shaven and domed of forehead, with keen hazel eyes and the controlled voice of the well-educated professional man, as he reached him and shook hands. "I knew it must be you the moment I saw," with a glance at Menelik, "*him*. How are you? And welcome home."

"You got my telegram, then?"

"Yes. But I should have met you anyway."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you."

"Oh, not at all. Not at all."

The two men, each a little shy of the other, continued to talk commonplaces while the porter, always under Menelik's distrustful eye, and not in the least assisted by Menelik's unintelligible jabber, found Masterson's cabin-trunk, his brass-clamped gun-cases, his dunny-bags, and his camp-kit. Then, these retrieved from behind the luggage barriers, Haringford, half paternally and half in the suave manner which he reserved for his most important clients, broke the first of his news.

"Your aunt, Miss Masterson," began Haringford, "I wrote you, didn't I, that she was still alive and—if I may say so—kicking—would rather you didn't put in an appearance at Carlton House Terrace until half-past three to-morrow afternoon. So, in the circumstances, my wife and I thought that, instead of going to an hotel for to-night, you might like to spend it with us."

"That's awfully kind of you both, Haringford. But," now Masterson in his turn glanced at Menelik, "shan't I be rather an imposition?"

"Oh," Haringford took the point, "don't worry about your man. We'll fix him up somehow or other."

"Really, though, it does seem——"

"My dear John, don't argue." The solicitor let the professional manner lapse as he laid a compelling hand on Masterson's arm. "It's long past nine already, and I've promised Dick—he's my son, you know—that he and one of his best girls can have the car to-night. So let's get a move on."

Getting a move on, they found Haringford's car, and, standing beside it, an old-fashioned-looking chauffeur who immediately began helping the porter to load the luggage. This done, Haringford motioned Menelik to a seat outside (a command which Menelik—the motor-cars in Abyssinia being limited to one—obeyed without enthusiasm); and gave the laconic order, "Home."

"Feel a bit strange, eh, John?" asked Haringford, as

they began to worm their way slowly out of he station into the lights of the Strand.

"Yes. I do rather. It's the strike, I expect. Not finding things normal, you know."

"Oh, strikes are normal enough, these days. You'll soon get used to them." And Haringford, smiling philosophically as he lit himself one of his rare cigarettes, relapsed into silence.

Barring a few hurried war-leaves, it was twelve years since Masterson had been in London; and even at first glance the changes in the place struck him as tremendous. Horses had practically vanished from the streets. The fleets of motor omnibuses seemed to have doubled and re-doubled and re-doubled again since his last visit.

And once into Piccadilly it seemed to the returning wanderer as though he were no longer in a remembered town. Here the crowds of foot-folk on the pavements were as no crowds he could recollect; the moving sky-signs that flickered and twirled and serpentined above them, more like the lights of Broadway than the lights of Home.

And, "Is this really Town?" he asked of his inquiring mind, as they came out of Piccadilly and swept up Regent Street. "Or is it New York?"

For in Regent Street the New Yorkishness of this new London was even more apparent than in Piccadilly. The long yellow regular curve of the Quadrant had been practically demolished; and in its place, all sorts of various-heighted edifices, almost all of them with their shop-fronts still a glare of electric radiance, rose jagged against the night.

"It all looks prosperous enough," decided the returning wanderer, as they went on, past Oxford Circus, metamorphosed out of all recognition, into the comparative quiet of comparatively unchanged Portland Place; "but I think I liked the old London best."

Which decision reached, the car drew up at an unpretentious front-door in one of those unpretentious side-streets which back on to the Outer Circle of Regent's Park.

§ 3

The unpretentious front-door of No. 16, Wessex Place, opened to reveal an unpretentious parlour-maid; and a moment or so later, John Masterson, having entered an unpretentious hall, found himself shaking hands with his hostess.

Unlike London, Mrs. Haringford had hardly altered with the

passing of the years. A trifle short, a trifle plump, with black eyes and graying hair, she still had that manner which seemed to say, "If you're a friend of James', you're a friend of mine"; and could still put a man at his ease with her very first sentence.

"So you're back at last," she said. "And starving, I've no doubt. This is Dick. He'll shew you where to wash; and then we'll have dinner at once."

"How do you do?" Haringford's only son, a slightly shorter edition of his father, one hand fidgeting at the white tie of his evening kit, materialized from behind his mother's back as she spoke. "Come along up to my room, if you don't mind. They'll unpack for you afterwards."

"What about my servant, though?"

"Oh, never mind about your nigger! The pater'll see to him."

The junior partner in Haringford and Haringford, unlike the senior, was of the talkative kind.

"I don't mind telling you," he confided while Masterson—having followed him up two flights of picture-hung staircase to a pleasant gas-warmed bedroom with Eton rowing photographs on its walls—was busying himself with soap and towels at the lavatory-basin, "that the pater's tickled to death at having got you home. Miss Masterson, of course, is a perfect dear. But when it comes to doing business . . ."

"My aunt Euphemia," spluttered Masterson, his head emerging from the water, "always was a difficult person to deal with."

"Difficult!" Dick Haringford laughed ruefully. "I should say she was difficult. Why the other day, when I went to call on her—to take her a cheque, as a matter of fact—you see, we've not been able to get probate yet, so the pater's had to finance things by borrowing from the Bank on his own security—she sent her major domo, and he's a thousand years old if he's an hour, to say that your father had always told her never to have anything to do with moneylenders. 'And would I please inform my father that she thoroughly disapproved of everything he had done since her brother's death.'"

"And what did you do then?" asked Masterson, towelling his unruly hair.

"Do?" Dick Haringford laughed again. "What could I do? You know the way things are run at Carlton House Terrace. I just fled."

Dick Haringford, having got thus far into his client's good graces, would have given a good deal to ask him a few personal

questions. But something about Masterson's appearance conveyed, even to the fence-rushing proclivities of youth, that "the pater," as usual, had been right in impressing caution in one's dealings with him; and eventually, with no personal questions asked, and a tactful, "I hope you won't think it beastly rude if I rush away immediately I've had a bit of soup and a cutlet," he left matters, as he himself phrased it, *in statu quo;* and escorted his guest downstairs to the library.

In the library—a tiny box of a red-papered room which barely contained its two saddle-bag chairs, its big desk, its safe and its bookcases—Mrs. Haringford, her husband beside her, was already plying the cocktail shaker.

"You'll be glad to hear," announced Mrs. Haringford, "that it's all arranged about your Menelik. Luckily, we've a little hotel just round the corner, and he's going to sleep there."

Florrie, the parlourmaid, entering to the vague aroma of cooking, prevented any further discussion of Menelik; and after the shortest of delays—during which Mrs. Haringford's excellent cocktails were drunk standing and without ceremony—the four of them went to their late meal.

"A bottle of the Widow seems indicated. Don't you agree, Martha?" beamed Haringford. "And the last of the eighteen-eleven to follow. That's the least we can do to welcome our exile home."

§ 4

Dinner, the soup and cutlet of Dick's prediction—an exquisitely fried sole to separate them—passed swiftly, and on the coming of the coffee, the junior partner in Haringford and Haringford, having kissed his mother good night, went out.

"Tired, John?" then queried Haringford.

"Not in the least. I got forty winks on the train."

"Then I suggest we adjourn."

After a few puffs they did adjourn—Mrs. Haringford tactfully pleading sleepiness—to the library.

"And now for the brandy," began Haringford, opening the safe with a key from his chain. "Here it is. A gift from your father, by the way. And practically unique—except for the six bottles in your own cellars, which we don't propose mentioning in our inventories for fear lest the legacy duty on them should prove prohibitive. However, we won't talk business to-night. We'll just sit down and make ourselves comfortable."

While they were at dinner, a little occasional table, with a

silver tray and two enormous glasses on it, had been set out between the two saddle-bag chairs; and into these glasses—Masterson having seated himself—Haringford, handling his bottle as it deserved, poured two careful portions.

"Priceless stuff," declared Haringford, also seating himself. "Taste it and see."

His father's Courvoisier eighteen-eleven was, even as his father's solicitor said, priceless; and, twirling it round its glass, letting its rare bouquet penetrate his nostrils ere he took the first delicious sip, John Masterson felt curiously content with existence. After all, there was no need to *hurry* that return to Addis.

"Remarkable drink, this," he remarked, relaxing into the depths of the saddle-bag chair; while Haringford, watching him covertly, thought, "He's a queer animal is John. Quite human in some ways; but a regular wild man from the woods in others. The less I tell him about things till to-morrow, the better."

Meanwhile, however, the fingers of John's right hand were taking counsel with his moustache; and eventually, his brandy finished, he managed to open up a question which had been on his mind ever since Marseilles.

"In your letter," he began, "you didn't give me any figures. I don't want to worry you about that to-night, of course. But I should like to know one thing. I've got rather a pet scheme for starting an English hospital in Addis Ababa—there's only a Yankee one there at the moment. But it'll take a very deuce of a lot of money to endow the thing decently. A hundred thousand at the least. Now do you think—you know how small my personal wants are—there'd be any chance—— "

"My dear John," Haringford spoke quickly, "didn't I say we wouldn't talk business to-night? You've had a long journey, and I've had a pretty tiring day. So let's leave the figures till to-morrow. Carfax—he was your father's accountant, so I thought it better to go on employing him—is coming to my office at ten o'clock, and has promised me an exact statement. As soon as you've got that in front of you, you'll know exactly where you stand. By the way, you're not thinking of going back to Addis Ababa, are you?"

"Well, I don't see why I shouldn't. After this probate job's done, I mean."

The two men talked on, each beating about the bush, till finally, Haringford said with some bluntness.

"As far as I can see, we've got a good six months' work in front of us. Any idea of your returning before that is simply out

of the question. Besides, a man in the position to which you have succeeded has certain duties. You've an estate, you must remember—people dependent on you."

"I realize that as well as you do, Haringford," interrupted Masterson. "But the estate can be sold, and the dependents pensioned. *That* isn't what's worrying me. What's worrying me is to know what earthly good I can do by stopping at home."

"Well"—the solicitor spoke slowly, feeling his way—"that depends. What about politics? I'm certain that either of the constitutional parties would welcome you with open arms."

"Would they, do you think?" Masterson's blue eyes kindled with a vague interest.

"I'm quite certain of it. However"—Haringford, one eye on the clock, rose from his chair and locked away the brandy bottle—"it's getting a bit late to start a political discussion. As I said before, you'll have plenty to keep you busy for the next half-year. There's the racing-stable, for instance. It'd be a pity, I think, if you didn't carry it on. And then," with a last purposeful smile, "who knows whether, once you've acclimatized yourself a bit, you won't want to get married and settle down."

To which John Masterson, his blue eyes displaying no interest of any kind, replied with an emphatic, "My dear Haringford, whatever else I am, I'm not a marrying man"; and, having been shewn his bedroom, retired for the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

THE last of the male Mastersons, admittedly a slow thinker, awoke from a dreamless night in Mrs. Haringford's chintz-papered, chintz-curtained spare-bedroom to a distinct feeling of puzzlement.

"Haringford's keeping something up his sleeve," he told himself as he wandered down to breakfast.

Breakfast, however, dispelled that impression. Watching now James Haringford, now Mrs. Haringford, and now Dick; listening to their commonplace conversation while he busied himself with his eggs and bacon, it seemed impossible to believe that either father or son could be—as they actually were—on tenterhooks.

"Must have been a delusion," he decided over his marmalade. "I expect I'm a bit on edge this morning."

Breakfast finished and his pipe lit, he asked about Menelik.

"Oh, the nigger's all right," Dick assured him. "My suggestion is that he stays where he's put till the car turns up; and then goes straight to Carlton House Terrace with your luggage. We can telephone from the office that they're to expect him. I must say, I'd give half a Bradbury to see your aunt's face when he arrives in that dressing-gown thing of his."

Masterson, not without some misgiving (for Menelik, left to his own devices, was apt to be an uncertain quantity), finally consented to this arrangement; and immediately he had done so, Haringford, with a glance at his watch and a brisk, "All right. If that's settled I'll get my hat and we'll be off," rang for the parlour-maid and ordered a taxi.

"Leave us alone once we get to the office," whispered James Haringford to his junior partner, while his client was thanking his wife for her hospitality and bidding her good-bye.

§ 2

Their rattletrap of a taxi once away from Wessex Place, and heading, under Dick's directions, across Great Portland Street for Bedford Court Row, John Masterson, cold despite his heavy ulster, felt all his depression return.

The day shewed London at its worst. Fog, laced with a thin drizzle of rain, crept in through every window-chink. Under their tyres, the roads were rivers of brown slime that splashed the unfortunate foot-folk as they hurried, umbrellas over their heads, to their shops and offices.

"Money?" thought the disgruntled Masterson. "What money could compensate a man for a climate like this?"

All the same, as their taxi chugged on and on, and father and son—one at his side and the other facing him—did their best to entertain him with occasional small talk, he began to experience a certain curiosity about the precise extent of his father's fortune. Not that it mattered how much his father had left. Not that anything mattered, really, except that he should escape—as soon as ever possible—from this marrow-chilling atmosphere to some place where a man could breathe.

The old vehicle continued gallantly on its way; decanted its freight, precisely at ten o'clock, before the seven stone steps and the pillared Adams doorway of No. 99, Bedford Court Row; and presently John Masterson, having followed his top-hatted companions down a dark, panelled passage and through various doors of time-blackened oak, seated himself, facing the thin light cast by two reflectors set high outside the two tall windows, by the big desk of James Haringford's private room.

"Now," he thought, "I really am going to find out if I can afford that hospital."

James Haringford, however—as soon as his son, pleading pressure of work on "that Chancery Court job of Toby Wainwright's," had hung up his hat and departed—did not appear to be in any immediate hurry. Seating himself, fidgeting with a paper or two, once more eyeing his client with his peculiar half-parental, half-professional smile, he seemed—to the anxious and suddenly perceptive Masterson—far more like a doctor about to break the seriousness of his condition to a sick patient, than a lawyer about to impart the extent of a bequest to an enriched legatee.

And indeed, Haringford's opening words rather carried on that illusion.

"I never have professed to understand you thoroughly, John," he began. "But I'm convinced your father understood you even less. If he hadn't—— However, that's beside the point. The point is that you've got to be prepared for," smiling again, "rather a shock. I don't know—and it's a habit of mine never to state facts until I'm quite certain of them—exactly what figures Carfax is going to shew us. But I can tell you this much. They'll be large. Very much larger than anything you could possibly have expected."

"Really?"

Masterson's one word conveyed no actual meaning. Yet to James Haringford, watching his client very closely, it seemed that he had been more than wise in withholding his full information until now.

"John's the last man in the world to have this thrown at him," decided Haringford, once more fidgeting with his papers; and went on:

"Oh, yes. Really! In fact, I may say that when I first saw the draft figures I almost doubted the evidence of my own eyes. Your father, you see, was a very self-contained man. He never took anybody, not even those of us who were closest to him, very far into his confidence. However"—for the last time that peculiar half-parental, half-professional smile played over the solicitor's clean-shaven mouth—"it's no good *my* beating about the bush any more. Carfax—I've no doubt—is already here. So we may as well have him in; and then you can see for yourself."

Haringford, his piece spoken, pressed a bell-push on his desk; and almost immediately there entered an under-sized shock-headed clerk, who, admitting that "Mr. Carfax" had been on the premises "the best part of twenty minutes," was told to "shew him up."

"Sound fellow, Carfax," confided the man of the law while they waited for the man of the figures.

"Really," reiterated Masterson, to whom the waiting seemed like an interminable age.

For, by this time, all the "wild man of the woods" in Haringford's client was alert to danger. Still in that suddenly perceptive mood, he could feel the whole atmosphere of the room vibrant with strange tensions; could feel, too, that the instinct of early morning had been correct, that his father's solicitor really was keeping something—something of the most peculiar import—"up his sleeve."

"Mr. Herbert Carfax, sir!"

To Masterson, the re-entering clerk's announcement of his accountant; Haringford's quiet, "How do you do, Carfax? So sorry to have kept you waiting"; his own equally quiet, "Good morning, Mr. Carfax," and the closing of the sanctum-door upon the three of them, appeared like one simultaneous happening. Shaking hands with the stocky new-comer, re-seating himself, watching those stubby capable fingers unlatch the attaché case they had been carrying to produce various docketed bundles of intensely business-like-looking papers, it came to him that the strange tensions in the atmosphere had increased their vibrations, that the whole place had become electric with them.

"Steady," he told himself. "Steady!"

But the vibrations still increased; and now imagination, abruptly active in him, began to reveal the scene for the intensest drama, with Carfax—Carfax whose good-tempered bull-dog of a countenance displayed, as he drew a spectacle-case from his pocket and adjusted a pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses over his mild blue eyes, nothing but a portentous solemnity—for its principal protagonist.

The accountant, as the solicitor before him, did not appear to be in any immediate hurry. He, too, apparently, after seating himself on the opposite side of the desk from Haringford and selecting one paper from among his docketed bundles, considered it necessary to prepare his client for a shock.

"You may find the figures I've got here a bit—er—startling," he began. "And I'm quite prepared to admit that there may be one or two errors in them. When it came to book-keeping, your father wasn't exactly up to date. However, the Bank of England's been courtesy itself; and fortunately, your father—just before he died—entrusted the keys of his strong-boxes there to me. So that, as far as stocks and bonds go, allowing of course for day-to-day market fluctuations, we're right to a penny piece. But the other banks haven't been quite so easy. They won't let us know what the balances are, or the cash on deposit, till they've got your personal permission to do so. That's why—as I said just now—there may be one or two errors in this statement of mine. Still, we can't be more than twenty-thousand pounds wrong one way or the other; and that, in an estate of this magnitude, is merely a fleabite."

On which, thinking the ground sufficiently prepared, Herbert Carfax, of Carfax, Polebery and Carfax, passed over the one paper he had selected from his bundles—and sat back to watch its effect

§ 3

For at least two minutes after Herbert Carfax had handed him that long sheet of white foolscap, headed, "Estate of the late Robert Masterson. Preliminary Schedule of Investments and other Properties," the face of Robert Masterson's heir moved never a muscle. Only his eyes, the pupils of them dilating and dilating to pale blue sixpences, displayed the emotions that were in him. And for at least another minute after his eyes had shewn him the final figures—the utterly incredible final figures set out in red ink at the foot of that amazing document—consecutive thought altogether deserted his brain. The thing—the ghastly, burdensome thing—couldn't be true! His father—his father couldn't, simply couldn't have been worth that amount of money. Carfax—that "sound fellow" Carfax—must be a lunatic. They were all three of them lunatics—lunatics in a golden asylum!

Another half-minute passed; and now, as the figures—the utterly incredible final figures—began to dance a red fandango before his eyes, consecutive thought returned, blindingly, to his miserable brain.

"Five millions sterling!" throbbed that brain. "Five millions, three hundred and fifty-one thousand and nineteen pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence sterling!" And then, once more, "It isn't true. It can't be true. We're all three of us mad—mad!"

At last, the figures ceased their dancing. At last, wrenching his eyes from them, he became aware that Haringford and Carfax were watching him. "I mustn't let *them* see," he told himself. "I mustn't let *them* see what I think about *him*."

For now, suddenly, all his thoughts about his dead father were black, bitter, unforgiving. He felt that he hated the man; hated the secretive old man who had piled up these millions and dropped them, a burden not to be borne, across his shoulders.

Always, he had loathed the thought of over-much money. And this—this wasn't just over-much money. This meant riches—riches beyond belief—riches so . . . so damnably indecent that no man—no self-respecting man—had any right either to make or to inherit them.

A final half-minute passed, giving him a vision of those riches, unspendable, inalienable, growing, growing always, interest on interest, principal on principal, till the five millions became ten millions, fifty, an hundred. Then, controlling himself as he had

never before needed self-control, he laid Carfax's paper face downward on his knee ; and asked his first purposeful question :

" Mr. Carfax, and you, Haringford ! How much of this—of this stupendous amount, is actually mine ? "

" It's all yours, John." Haringford spoke very quietly. " The Government, of course, will take its death duties—they'll be a couple of millions, I should imagine. And your sisters-in-law are entitled, in addition to the amounts your father settled on them at marriage, to the benefits of a special trust-fund, amounting to not more than two hundred thousand pounds, of which you are to be sole trustee. But otherwise—— "

" Otherwise "—Masterson, still exercising that iron self-control, spoke quietly as his solicitor—" every farthing is mine."

" Precisely. And now, my dear John, if you'll allow me to, I'll just run through the main provisions of the will."

" Never mind about the will, Haringford. Just tell me one more thing. What happens if I—if I refuse to accept this legacy ? "

" Then, my dear John "—Haringford's calm was the calm of the lawyer who has done his duty—" you will be, not to put too fine a point on it, penniless."

" I think I'd almost rather be penniless, as you put it, than accept "—tapping the document on his knee—" this ! "

Masterson's lips closed stubbornly as he spoke ; and for just a second or so Haringford, glancing across his desk at Carfax, felt doubtful of the whole issue. " The man's out of his senses," he thought. " What's the use of arguing with him ? " Argument, however, seemed the only card to play ; and after yet another second, picking up the will, he began :

" Believe me, my dear John, when I tell you that I'm not trying to persuade you to do anything that's against your conscience. I'm only trying to do my duty, both by you, and by my old client and old friend, your father. Your father's money —I need hardly tell you—was made quite honestly. He paid you, while he was alive, an allowance of two thousand five hundred a year. On his death, needless to say, that allowance automatically ceases. And in the case of your renouncing your inheritance, he says—let me read you the actual words, ' I give and bequeath all that residuary estate referred to in clauses twenty to thirty-one of this my will to ' "—smiling, the solicitor played his trump—" ' the eldest son of my son, John Masterson, should he have male issue, and failing that, as the Public Trustee, who shall in the case of my son John renouncing his inheritance become Trustee of my entire estate, shall direct, to . . . ' "

Haringford's words trailed away into the unintelligible jargon of the Law ; and, listening to them, John Masterson's heart sank into his shooting boots. The thing—even without Haringford's final explanation, " So you see, all that you can do by not accepting, even if you don't marry and don't have children, is to postpone the entire settlement of the estate until your own death "—was clear enough. Refusing, he could accomplish nothing save his own poverty. Accepting . . .

Yet how could he accept, with all the wanderer in him crying out that this was the end of freedom, the end of wandering, the beginning of a new life through which he could never follow his own bent, but only the bent of his father's money, the intolerable path of great possessions, hedged about with a thousand responsibilities, chaining his feet—willy nilly—to the land of his birth.

" Though, of course," said the commonsense in him, " you could give the bulk of it away."

All this while Carfax, far more amazed than Haringford, had remained silent. Now, however, seeing the solicitor at a loss for further argument, he, too, began.

" I also," argued Herbert Carfax, " had the honour of your father's friendship. He was a hard man, Mr. Masterson ; and reticent. But always just. He believed, as every thinking man must believe, that the possession of great wealth entailed a great responsibility. But he was very old ; and, towards the end (he told me so himself), he could not see his own responsibilities clearly. That was why, perhaps, he laid them upon you."

And on that, suddenly, John Masterson's mind clarified ; and, speaking so slowly that it seemed to the two who heard him as though every word were being dragged from the very depths of his stomach, he said :

" Mr. Carfax ! And you, Haringford ! There are a thousand reasons why I don't want to accept this money. There are five million reasons why I should be infinitely happier without it—even without that two thousand five hundred a year. But a man's responsibilities come before his happiness ; and since my father has laid these particular responsibilities upon me, I can only accept them, trusting that I shall see my way to use his riches wisely, to do this duty well."

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

THE "social conscience" is a peculiar quality; and to John Masterson, in whom that peculiar quality happened to be inordinately strong, the hour which followed his decision to accept his father's fortune was purest torment. Signing the few preliminary documents for Somerset House, it struck him that he might as well be signing his own execution-warrant. And even when, those preliminary documents signed, he bade Haringford goodbye and drove towards the West End, his mind still refused all those sensations of material ecstasy which the average man or woman (according to their own untried belief) imagine for themselves in similar circumstances.

"Millions," he kept telling himself. "What on earth am I going to do with them?" And then, a slight gleam of humour coming to his aid, "Well! I suppose I can manage to blue ten bob on my lunch."

Lunch, however, could hardly be taken yet awhile. So the new millionaire—his taxi becoming blocked in the neighbourhood of Oxford Circus—decided on a walk.

The fog still held, though the rain-drizzle had ceased. Regent Street, its shop-windows gleaming yellow through the pale slather, looked almost romantic. His driver's surprised, "Much obliged to you, sir," for the extra half-crown, struck the first pleasant chord of the day. "Given that taxi-man a bit of pleasure anyway," decided Masterson, striding out through the crowd.

Striding, the pricks of his social conscience ceased. After all, if the world thrust responsibilities upon a man, he could but do his best to cope with them. After all, if a man wanted to do people a bit of good, money gave him the power.

Nevertheless, as he went on, automatically, out of Regent Street and through Burlington Gardens towards the Arcade, depression renewed itself. His mental pictures of Abyssinia seemed already blurring. Here—here in this unaltered corner

of Mayfair—here, under the echoing colonnade where never a shop-front appeared to have changed a name since his boyhood, he found it almost impossible to realize the existence of a land where the highwayman still hanged in the market-place, and the hand-lopped thief whined at the gallows' foot, and a hospital—a paltry hundred thousand hospital—had seemed the very height of a reformer's ambition. "I've got to do something more worth while than that," he determined suddenly. "Something very much more worth while."

Half-way through the Arcade, seeing himself in a chance mirror, and remarking, for the first time, the peculiarity of his appearance, Masterson's thoughts took a brand-new turn. "You look like a tramp," the mirror informed him. "The Lord knows what you *do* look like in that ulster, and those shooting boots and that Trilby hat of yours."

The ordering of new clothes, however, had always been one of his pet detestations; and after a second glance in the mirror, deciding to postpone the visit to his tailor till he had had something to eat, he walked on.

In Piccadilly, the fog had almost disappeared. The pavements were already dry under his heavily shod feet. Clothes forgotten, he continued in his stride, till, at the corner of Bond Street, some half a dozen fur-wrapped women, waiting for the policeman to shepherd them through the traffic, completely blocked the way.

Two of these women were chattering at the tops of their voices; and, unwittingly, he found himself listening to their chatter. "But, my dear Irene," said one of them, "I tell you he's too adorable. A divine dancer—one of the best-dressed men I know—and as for his music . . ." To which the other, in a high girlish voice, retorted: "Have it your own way, darling. Marry him if it amuses you. But don't try and make *me* like that type. Because what *I* want, is a really truly honest-to-God cave-man."

The unknown Irene turned her head as she spoke; and for just one fraction of a second her eyes—glancing upwards—met Masterson's. Wonderful eyes they were, too—jade—or was it sea-green?—set wide under thin, perfectly curved brows in a face flawless as white lotus or Ethiopian magnolia. Also—or so it seemed to him in that fraction of a second before the head averted itself—there flashed from those eyes a message. "We've photographed you," they seemed to be flashing. "We shall remember you. Remember us if we meet again."

"Rummy idea, that!" mused John Masterson, as the policeman stopped the traffic and the fur-wrapped women strolled from

pavement to pavement. "Wonder why she looked at me at all. No, I don't, though. These clothes of mine would make anyone look at a man if he wore them in Town."

Beyond Bond Street, at the entrance to the Berkeley, where big cars clustered thick as tanks in action, he lost sight of the pair. But the memory of those wonderful eyes, and of the lesson he had drawn from their glance, remained. "A tramp," repeated his thoughts. "You look like a tramp. No wonder people stare."

§ 2

"I say, aren't you Masterson?"

A voice, somehow remembered, disturbed Masterson's thoughts; and, turning, he found himself confronted by a tall, clean-shaven, aristocratic-looking man, blond of smooth hair and merry of gray eye, who went on, taking his recognition for granted, to offer a very well-gloved hand.

Grasping that hand, he muttered, his memory at fault, a confused, "Hallo! How are you?" and made to pass on.

The stranger, however, was not to be shaken off. "Don't you know who *I* am?" he asked; and, before Masterson could reply, continued, "You don't. Well, perhaps it's not to be wondered at. We haven't met for—let's see, how long is it?—fifteen years, I should say. Saw you at Lord's last—on your governor's coach—the year Harrow whacked us by ten wickets. I'm Starleigh. Rupert Starleigh."

"Good Lord!" Masterson's rather solemn face lit. "Of course you're Starleigh. You've changed, though."

"So have you."

They stood talking, Masterson a trifle awkward, the other voluble, till Starleigh said, "I say, if you're at a loose end, what about lunch? Just on your way to the Lustrum, were you? *I* give the Lustrum a miss these days. But the grub at the Caxton's pretty fair—if you're still a member."

"I'm afraid"—hesitated Masterson—"that I look rather a sight for the Caxton. I only got back to Town last night."

"Then, my dear chap," the other's red, rather sensuous lips parted to shew a set of excellent teeth, "the Caxton's the very place. If the worst comes to the worst, the hall-porter'll only take you for a backwoods peer."

The new millionaire, glad enough to have found any refuge from introspection, made no further protest; and, a moment or so later, Lord Rupert Starleigh, third son of the Marquess of

Grinstead, and half-commission broker on the London Stock Exchange, was steering him deftly across Piccadilly, under the arches of the Ritz, and down St. James' Street towards Pall Mall.

"Sorry to see your governor died the other day," said Starleigh, just before they reached the Club. "Topping old boy, your governor. Devilish few of his kidney left nowdays, I can tell you. You're the last of the bunch, eh?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." Starleigh, ever since that chance recognition, had been thinking a good deal more than the friend of his school-days realized. "Do you come in for the whole packet?"

"More or less."

By now, they had reached the ten steep steps of the Caxton, up which Starleigh—having decided that nothing was to be gained by rush tactics—proceeded with his usual aplomb, while Masterson—bothered about his clothes—followed doubtfully behind. "Haven't been inside the place for years and years," thought Masterson. "Don't even know if the hall-porter'll recognize me."

The porter's memory, however, proved even better than Starleigh's; and after replying to the man's entirely unsurprised, "Good day, Mr. Masterson," with an entirely self-conscious, "Good morning, Matthews," the returning exile—his shameful hat and shamefuller ulster deposited with Starleigh's silk-lined chesterfield and broad-brimmed bowler in the cloak-room—found himself ascending the big marble-balustered stairs.

"Cocktail?" asked Starleigh, dropping into one of the sofas on the first landing.

"Thanks."

The drinks arrived; and Starleigh, having insisted on paying the be-medalled waiter, suggested they lunch immediately. "Got to go back to the City for half-an-hour," he explained. "Mustn't stay here a minute later than three." So Masterson followed on again into the high, rather awe-inspiring dining-room, where his host, pausing at the buffet-table, announced, "I plump for the dressed crab."

"Always liked Starleigh," he remembered, still following him—and the impressive wine-butler—to a corner table by one of the big windows overlooking the dank and leafless garden. Nor did Starleigh, once they had seated themselves, say anything to dispel that old liking.

"Quaint place this, is not it?" confided Starleigh *sotto voce* over their crab. "I always want to go Labour when I see our Party *en masse*. By the way, you used to be a bit of a Socialist

in the old days, didn't you? Eton Mission—and that sort of thing."

Masterson, still amused, denied the accusation; and Starleigh's talk, spiced with an occasional jibe at the various political personages who were lunching, after the self-satisfied manner of their kind, all about them, continued inconsequent till the arrival of steak-and-kidney pie. Then, very tactfully, he began to work the conversation round to his objective.

"Where have you been hiding yourself all these years?" asked Starleigh. "Having a gay time?"

"Not exactly," laughed Masterson. "I've been in Abyssinia."

"The deuce you have!" Starleigh paused, waiting for further confidences; then, finding none vouchsafed, decided it time for a little expansion.

"You always were one of the lucky ones," he expanded. "Wish I could afford the time to travel. What with Income Tax and one thing and the other, my poor old dad's broke to the wide. So I've joined the world's workers. Stock Exchange, you know. And a dog's life it is. Not that I've any cause to grumble. I manage to scratch along pretty well. Only, of course, it doesn't run to matrimony or anything like that."

Here, the Stilton approaching, Starleigh broke off the personal information. "Port!" said he, eyeing the ripe cheese with approval. "A glass of the seventy-two, don't you think? Or shall we try the sixty-eight?"

"I'll leave that to you."

By the time the "sixty-eight" arrived, the dining-room was very nearly empty; and Rupert Starleigh very nearly ready to launch his final attack.

"What on earth made you stay all that time in Abyssinia?" he asked, raising the wine to his lips; and, having been told in Masterson's usual hesitant way a few of the reasons which had kept him so long out of England, went on, "Working for 'em, were you? Kind of Rajah Brooke, eh? That must have been pretty good fun. Still, I suppose you're glad to be back. I know I should be. 'Specially if I'd come into a whacking big estate. By the way, what about your governor's gee-gees? The stable hasn't been doing much good this last year or two."

Starleigh's questions continued, with an occasional answer from his guest, for another few minutes. Then, feeling the ground sufficiently prepared, he discarded further finesse, saying, "Look here, old chap. I don't want you to think I'm butting in or anything of that sort. But the fact is that my firm used to do a certain amount of business for your governor, and I've been

wondering—I don't mind telling you, I thought about it the moment I saw you in Piccadilly—whether we could be of any help to you. You're sure to have to sell out a certain amount of stuff to pay for the infernal death-duties; and anyway"—with a smile—" a stockbroker's a necessary evil for the idle rich."

" My dear fellow, I'll be only too glad. From what I gathered at the lawyers' this morning, there'll be "—Masterson, unwilling to reveal more, begged the issue—" quite a lot of securities to be disposed of."

" Well, don't be in too much of a hurry. Gilt-edged stuff isn't going any worse yet awhile."

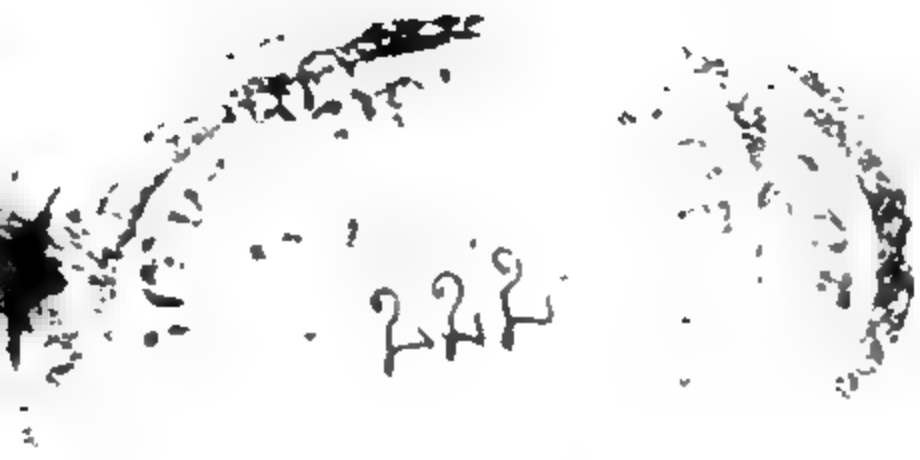
Starleigh, rather pleased at having accomplished his purpose so easily, rose as he spoke ; and suggested a cigar.

" Rather have a pipe if you don't mind," said Masterson.

In the smoking-room, which was not unduly crowded, the stockbroker, his Corona Corona alight, began to talk shop ; and for a good half-hour, his guest, always a good listener, very nearly forgot that—for him—such talk could no longer be purely academic.

Gradually, however, as Starleigh talked on, the personal application of what he was hearing came home to Masterson's mind ; and with it a renewal of all those sensations he had experienced in Haringford's office ; so that he was not sorry when, with a glance at the solemn-faced French clock on the big red marble mantelpiece, Starleigh changed the conversation, saying, " Hope I haven't been boring you to death," and, having drawn a thin gold-monogrammed memorandum-book from the breast-pocket of his short black jacket, went on : " I say, are you doing anything to-morrow week ? If not, I wish you'd join us at Ciro's. My sister Jill's coming. And the two Carslake girls. The eldest one, that's Cynthia, married Tom Trevor. You remember him. Chap at Luxmoore's, with an impediment in his speech. But the younger one, Irene—she's been out a couple of years—is still single. Bit of a flyer she is, too. One of these modern girls, don't you know."

And, " Irene," thought John Masterson, accepting the invitation. " Irene ! What a curious coincidence."



CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

MASTERSON, as he waved good-bye to Starleigh from the steps of the Caxton, was still thinking about that peculiar coincidence. But the thought did not long survive the departure of the stock-broker's taxi for Throgmorton Street.

Once again—as he glanced at his heavy gold watch, and, remembering Euphemia's sticklishness for punctuality, decided that he must still postpone that more than ever necessary visit to his tailor's—the weight of his inheritance began to obsess him, and by the time he reached Waterloo Steps he wished that he had "had the pluck to let the Public Trustee have the lot."

Pausing in his slow strides to look down, his blue eyes heavy with thought, towards Constitution Hill, he felt himself hopelessly incompetent to handle even the half of his fortune.

"Sheer cowardice, that," he had to admit, glancing leftwards down the short *cul-de-sac* of the Terrace, above the end wall of which—a sight remembered ever since he could remember anything—rose the blackened statue of the Nelson Monument. "Sheer, beastly cowardice."

Then, resolutely, he walked the last few yards to his home.

The huge yellow house, lying well back from the short broad road, had not altered a window-curtain since his earliest recollection of it. The two big old-fashioned bells, polished to death, still looked like enormous golden soup-plates either side the big double doors under the pillared portico ; and, ringing the one marked "Visitors," he still felt—what were the childish words ?—"like Jack-the-Giant-Killer."

The bell, despite its old-fashionedness, answered sharply enough to Masterson's tug ; and almost immediately the big double doors opened, showing him two very tall footmen, large importance on their pale white faces and large silver-gilt buttons on their worn plum-coloured liveries, just behind whose ample

backs there hovered Mr. Ellison, his father's little, age-old, clean-shaven major domo; and Mr. Parker, his father's big, age-old, bewhiskered butler.

"Welcome home, Mr. John," quavered his father's age-old major domo; "Welcome home, sir," quavered his father's age-old butler; and, their greetings acknowledged, proceeded with the old ritual, relieving him—or rather relieving the footmen who had relieved him—of his comic ulster and still more comic Trilby, and ushering him—the baser offices of the footmen being now accomplished—through the glass inner doors of that enormous mansion into the vast gloomy hall, seascape-hung and furnished with four huge marble-topped side-tables, on top of which stood the eight giant porcelain vases which Masterson had always yearned to smash with his catapult when a boy.

Hence—his office also accomplished—Mr. Parker, rubbing wrinkled hands, departed to inform the basement that "the new master had come home without a rag to his back"; while the new master in question, still subconsciously yearning for that catapult, inquired, first after Menelik and then after his aunt.

"Your black man, Mr. John," quavered Mr. Ellison, "arrived some hours back. Miss Euphemia—I am glad to assure you—is in her usual health. I shall take you up to her myself, if you will allow me to do so, Mr. John. But before doing so, I may, I trust, express, both on my own behalf and on behalf of all your staff, the hope that you, too, are in the enjoyment of your usual health, and that, when you come to inspect the establishment, you will find everything to your satisfaction."

"I'm sure I shall, Ellison."

Masterson, secretly amused, spoke in the subdued tones which the very atmosphere of that cavernous hall seemed to entail; and was just about to follow his man up the acres of frayed red-and-blue Axminster that carpeted the vast ascent of the picture-hung principal staircase, when the whine of a dog attracted his attention, and, turning his head, he saw a very old white bull-terrier come nosing out of a half-opened door which memory placed as that of his father's smoking-room.

"Mastersleigh Martinet, Mr. John," explained the major domo, as the bull-terrier, still whining, made his way doubtfully towards them. "He's never been the same since your poor dear father died. Breaking his heart, so the vet says. Though personally, I think it's just *anno domini*. He's rising fifteen, is the Martinet, Mr. John. Maybe you remember him?"

"Of course I remember you, don't I, old chap?" said Masterson.

The dog, however, still doubtful, only acknowledged his words with a little shiver; nor did he cease his intermittent whining until the last of the male Mastersons, vaguely hurt that the last survivor of those famous Mastersleigh kennels, which had swept the show-ring in the eighties, should have forgotten his new owner, clinched their friendship by stooping to pat the big neck-muscles; and, this done, ordered his new property—Mr. Ellison being by now all impatience—with a stern, "Heel, Martinet! Heel!" to follow on up the staircase.

§ 2

The Martinet was still following his new owner when he and Mr. Ellison arrived, along a landing broad enough for chariot-racing, at the two stupendous mahogany doors of the drawing-room; still obediently at his heels when the major domo ushered him into the presence of his aunt. But something in the atmosphere of that Jack-the-Giant-Killerish apartment—possibly the shabbiness of it—seemed to bring back its trouble to the canine soul; and even as Mr. Ellison quavered, "Mr. John, Miss Euphemia," and so quavering withdrew, Masterson found himself entirely without support.

Euphemia—he perceived—was sitting as she always had sat, at the very end of the room, on a hideous gilt and crewel-work chair in front of one of the almost equally hideous marble fireplaces. She did not speak as he made his way towards her across the yellow bear-skin rugs and the black parquet; nor—when he finally reached her side—did she vouchsafe him anything more than one wrinkled hand, still rather fine under its lace mitten, and a terse, "So you're back, are you, John? And about time, too," in her high, harsh, rather unpleasant voice.

All the same her eyes, of a slightly paler blue than his own, twitched nervously behind her old-fashioned glasses; and as, having acknowledged her greeting and relinquished her hand, he proceeded to take the companion chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, it came home to him with some force that his juvenile terror of this white-haired, sharp-featured, wizened old lady, who still looked, in her black bombazine and white Bertha, more like the Witch of Endor as limned by some cheap biblical draughtsman of the eighteen-sixties than a character out of modern life, had completely disappeared.

"I told Ellison to see we had tea at four o'clock," continued the wizened old lady, glancing at the Gargantuan timepiece between the two Gargantuan candelabra. "And the staff's coming

up at half-past. That gives us the best part of an hour. I must say, I am glad to see you, John. These lawyers—they're worse than the Jews. I'm sure James Haringford has robbed you of thousands since your father died."

The catalogue of Euphemia's financial distrust lasted some minutes; and at the end of it, getting no satisfactory reply, she burst out, with a little of her old resolution, "You always were a fool, John; and if your father had taken my advice, which he never did, he wouldn't have made you his heir."

To which Masterson, still unperturbed, replied with a calm, "My dear aunt, I only wish the governor *had* taken your advice"; and was just about to elaborate the statement when Mr. Parker and one of the footmen made their appearance with a perfect silver-mine of a badly cleaned tea-set, which they proceeded to arrange on a scratched satin-wood table in front of the fire.

This done, the old lady, gathering courage, went on:

"You always remind me of your mother, John. She was a fool, too. Never could look after her housekeeping properly. That was why *I* had to come and live here. Still, your poor dear mother wasn't quite such a fool as you are. At least, she knew which side her bread was buttered."

By now, thanks to the fire having burnt through and to the footman having drawn the curtains and turned on most of the many lights in the big crystal chandeliers, the red-damask-curtained drawing-room—despite its shabbiness—seemed almost cosy; and, presently, as Euphemia continued to talk about his mother, whose pale portrait hung just above his head, Masterson again experienced that tiny thrill at being "home."

"Home," however, still held many mysteries; and one of these he attempted to solve by asking, at a slight check in the hunt of his aunt's reminiscences, "I suppose you don't know, by any chance, how it was that the governor came to leave such a stupendous amount of money?"

"How it was that he came to leave such a stupendous amount of money?" pondered Euphemia, who, as many women of advanced years, had the habit of repeating any important question that one asked her. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that, John. My brother, of course, was a very careful man. And, as a family, we always have had money. Your grandfather—he died when I was fourteen and your father twenty-two—left quite a big fortune. He made it out of land, I think. And then Robert, when *he* got his money, went into the iron business. He retired, I remember, the year David was born. That would be just after the Franco-Prussian War."

"And since then?"

"Since then, John"—Euphemia, her eyes twitching again, evaded the direct question—"we've always lived in the same way. You'll go on living in the same way, too. Won't you? I mean—you won't give up this house. If you did, I—I don't think I could stand it. In fact, I'm sure I couldn't stand it. Everybody else's house I go into, these days, is so horribly *poky*. And it's freehold. And then—there are the servants. I'm sure we're very lucky with our servants."

And Euphemia, having at last worked round to the one subject which had been exercising her octogenarian mind ever since Haringford had broken the news of "Baby John's" succession to her brother's estate, continued pathetic till yet another knock, and Mr. Ellison's respectful, "I have the staff outside, Miss Euphemia—if it would now be convenient for the master to see them," broke off the one-sided conversation.

§ 3

If ever a man breathed a sigh of relief at being released from an utterly uncongenial task, it was our friend, John Masterson, when, some two and a half hours later, Mr. Ellison finally escorted him, by yet more acres of red-and-blue Axminster, to the vast octagonal bedroom, with the gilt-embossed wall paper, the mammoth mahogany furniture, and the heavy gilt-pelmeted velvet curtains, on whose four-poster bed his father had slept ever since the night—four-and-thirty years ago now—which had seen the beginning of his widowerhood.

It seemed to him—as Mr. Ellison, with one frightened glance at Menelik who, retrieved from a bare cell-like room above the garage, was now busy with shirt and shirt-studs at the glowing fireplace, and one last, "I do trust you're satisfied with everything you've seen, Mr. John," shambled back on to the landing—that the roughest shack on the most desolate prairie would be preferable to this grotesque establishment, which, inspected till his feet ached in their shooting boots, had still not yielded up the half of its grotesquerie.

The place was a nightmare. Its underpaid staff, each and all of whom, from the oldest sewing-woman to the youngest pantry-boy, had been formally presented, always to his aunt's muttered comments, by the major domo, numbered seven-and-thirty. Its ugly plate, set out in four soldierly rows on the four big tables in Mr. Parker's crypt of a pantry, would have provided racing-cups for the whole of Australia. The contents of its linen cupboards,

pridefully displayed by the housekeeper, Mrs. Simcox, who, fatter than ever, vouchsafed between each heavy breath, " Oh, Mr. John, Mr. John, I dandled you when you was a tiny babby," must have kept Belfast busy for a year. Its pictures, relics of sixty Victorian Royal Academies, could have stocked—though not beautifully—a Municipal gallery. Its china-room, shelves packed from floor to ceiling with Edward the Seventh Copeland and Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse Dresden, contained nearly every porcelain atrocity manufactured between the eighteen-forties and the nineteen-hundreds.

While as for its six caves of wine cellarage, where Mr. Ellison's candle, flickering round port-pipes and sherry-butts and bin after bin of wine-flagons whose contents would have soused a county, at last discovered those six bottles of priceless Courvoisier ; its coal-mines of coal-cellars ; its sculleries and its scullery-maids ; its vaulted kitchen in front of whose range a chef larger than two Mrs. Simcoxes appeared only as a small devil in white busied eternally over an eternal fire ; its larders and its refrigerators ; its lift-mechanisms and its hot-water mechanisms ; and last but not least, its garage with its four chauffeurs and its six pre-war cars, each one more over-limousined than the other—these things seemed to John Masterson, perpending them while he unlaced his boots, the final proof of his dead father's lunacy.

All the while he was getting ready for dinner, his social conscience kept reminding him of the poor, of the hungry, of the unemployed. Even the awed Menelik's, " Oh, master, thou art indeed a Ras in thine own country ; therefore surely thou wilt increase the wages of thy body-servant," failed to raise the ghost of a smile on his set, unhappy features.

" Why not ? " he decided, granting the Abyssinian's request. " Why not ? "

§ 4

At a quarter to eight, Menelik, his brown face one ripple of joy at the granted opulence, departed for the basement. At ten minutes to, Menelik's master, still unutterably depressed, switched off the seven lights of the big brass electrolier and made his way out of the bedroom.

This, the fourth floor of the house, had been entirely his father's. Inspecting it cursorily, he found—in addition to the already discovered bath-room with its tall, mahogany-sheathed contraption of douches, showers, sitzes, and plunges, its cushioned lounge-chair, its marble-edged lavatory basin and its silver-plated towel-

rail—a three-roomed office, each room leading out of the other, and each separated from the other by double doors covered with thick red baize ; and at the opposite end of the landing, beyond the lift-shaft, yet another room, furnished with an appallingly ugly fumed oak dining-room suite, where his father—he remembered—in the days before the lift had been installed, had been wont to take a solitary breakfast.

" Poor old governor," he thought, his heart softening a little at the memory of that solitary breakfast. " He can't have got much fun out of life." Then, once more depressed, he pushed the button for the automatic lift ; entered it ; closed the iron gate ; and let himself down to dinner.

Dinner—a lonely one because " Miss Euphemia," as Mr. Parker informed him on his descent, " had one of her headaches, and therefore begged to be excused "—provided a miserable finale for an emotional day.

Ushered, after refusing sherry, diagonally across the hall (which still reverberated to the last notes of a ghastly Burmese gong), he found himself straightway enthroned in solitary state—a plum-coloured footman at his either elbow, and Mr. Parker sedulous behind—at a table lit only with candlesticks and big enough to accommodate its forty.

The wine, about which he had not been consulted, was champagne ; the food not so hot as it might have been, and the manner of its serving, to match. Soup and salmon came on silver plates, the entrée and the bird on gold. A trifle followed the bird, a savoury the trifle ; and all the time the clock on the mantelpiece ticked and ticked ; while above it, his father's picture, seen dimly through the candle-glow, seemed to be grinning at his son's discomfiture.

At last Masterson's ordeal came to an end. At last Mr. Parker, having set a gold coffee-service, a cut-glass decanter of port, and a huge silver box of cigars on the mahogany, removed the silver-gilt dessert épergne to the sideboard ; waved his satellites to their supper, and, after inquiring whether anything else were needed (an inquiry which almost provoked his master to hysteria), followed them out of the room.

And, " Phew ! " thought Masterson, sipping his not too warm coffee. " Phew ! They call this luxury . . ."

For a minute or so he rejoiced that the ordeal should be over. Soon, however, solitude began to oppress him even more than the company of his servants. He poured himself a glass of port ; but the over-aged Cockburn tasted acrid in his mouth. He lit himself, as in duty bound, a cigar ; but the bone-dry Corona only

rasped his throat. After a few puffs of it, he put the weed down ; and, rising from his chair, switched on all the lights of that ridiculous apartment. Then he began to pace the apartment, finally coming to rest—his big hands deep in his trouser pockets and his blue eyes sombre with sheer ennui—before the picture of his father.

The picture, painted by some long-dead and long-forgotten Academician, still seemed to be grinning at him from where it hung, incredibly over-framed, above the colossal malachite mantelpiece between the two colossal ormolu serving-tables. Strive as he might, he could not read the riddle of that square, resolute countenance, with the wide forehead, its gray hair brushed back over the big ears, with the prominent cheek-bones, and the cleft, determined chin, and the gray mutton-chop whiskers which no change of fashion had ever induced his father to shave, and the queer, half-quizzical, half-benevolent eyes, long-lashed and bushy-browed, whose blue pupils—from whichever angle he regarded them—seemed to be staring straight into his own.

" You can't have been crazy," thought Masterson. " You must have known what you were doing when you made that will. Then why don't you tell me *why* you made it ; why don't you give me some hint of what you want *me* to do ? "

But the picture, though he looked at it for a long time, remained inscrutable ; and eventually, his mind completely fogged with the manifold emotions of the last twenty-four hours, he turned away from it, and, having clicked off the lights and blown out the candles, paced slowly from the room.

The huge empty hall, the huge empty staircase, scarcely illuminated by their dim lights, seemed full of fog—of that same fog which was in his own mind. Pacing, still slowly, past the absurd seascapes and the absurd side-tables and the absurdly gigantic porcelain vases towards the half-open door of the smoking-room, it came to him, not self-pityingly but as a mere statement of actual fact, that he was the loneliest soul on earth.

Yet there was a lonelier—Martinet ! The old dog, couched on the bear-skin hearthrug of the smoking-room, rose whining as he came through the door ; watched him without a movement while he took the big saddle-bag chair which had been his father's. Then, whining no longer, it crept towards him ; and, uplifting a doubtful muzzle, licked at his pendent hand.

" Poor old boy," said Masterson. " You don't understand why I'm in *his* chair, do you ? "

Yet somehow it seemed to him as though the dog did understand. For, as the lonely evening wore on, as Mr. Parker and his

satellites reappeared with the whiskey decanter and the biscuit barrel, and, having placed these on a table by the fire, left them to their own devices, it snuggled closer to him, resting its head on his knee while both of them watched their pictures in the fire.

Curious pictures they were, too—the dog's all of fights fought in puppyhood, and of rats long slain, and of that dead master whose presence still seemed to haunt this quiet room ; and the man's mainly of a girl, of a fur-wrapped girl with jade (or could they be sea-green ?) eyes, set wide under thin, perfectly curved brows in a face flawless as white lotus or Ethiopian magnolia

Yes ! a very curious picture that—for our celibate friend.

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ 1

OUR friend John Masterson's mental picture of the unknown Irene, however, died with the embers of the smoking-room fire, and during the seven days which followed he never saw it again. Because all through those seven days material considerations absorbed his every hour.

Still dazed with the first shock of his inheritance, he found himself caught up in a perfect web of legal and financial business. Interviews with Haringford, interviews with Carfax, interviews with leisurely officials at Somerset House, interviews with half a dozen different bank managers—these, varied only by rush visits to his tailors, his bootmakers, his hatters and his hosiers, and an occasional half-hour in the company of Euphemia, made up the sum total of his existence.

So that now—at half-past nine of a gray winter's morning—as he acknowledged the salute of Rogers, his head chauffeur, and stepped into the least ancient of the plum-coloured Daimlers for his first visit to Mastersleigh, he felt far more like a schoolboy released on a two days' exeat than a triple millionaire on his way to inspect another of his possessions.

The whole business of being a millionaire—he decided as his car left the big double doors of Carlton House Terrace, the shabby butler and the shabby flunkeys behind—was a damned nuisance. So he wouldn't think about it. No, by jingo, just for to-day he wouldn't think about it at all.

The car gathered speed ; but gradually, looking on London, on the immense complexity of its shops and houses, of its broad streets and mean alleys, of the factories by its river, and the big blocks of flats and the tiny villas and the larger villas and the imposing mansions beyond, Masterson's holiday-mood suffered eclipse ; and the sociologist in him started to compare this huge hotch-potch of half-baked civilization with the primeval savagery of Addis Ababa.

The problems of Addis were simple enough. The building of one hospital; the improvement of one railway-line; the mollifying of one harsh custom—such simple reforms might satisfy any man's social conscience. Whereas the reforms of London, the problems of London were insoluble. The very enormousness of the place, the very multifariousness of its activities, the very fact that two-thirds of its populace lived in a comfort unknown before the age of machinery while the other third rotted in slums, defied any theoretical system of racial betterment. "London's too big," he thought suddenly. "Too big, and too self-satisfied, and too"—he had to fumble for the word—"uncaring."

Beyond Kingston, however, the holiday-mood fell on him again.

The gray mists of early morning were gone. Warm in a new tweed overcoat, he opened the windows of the limousine and drank deep of the good, crisp, sunlit air. Town, and all that concerned it, had practically disappeared. He was among the green fields, among the bare hedges of an older England; of that England which, even in his farthest wanderings, had always been dear.

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§ 2

Mastersleigh Towers, to give the house its full title—built by him whom the men of his own days called "Skipper" Masterson, for a signal of his success when he retired from the iron trade—is an atrocity of atrocities, compared with which Tennyson's "gew-gaw castle pricking a Cockney ear," would be the purest poetry of architecture.

Gothic mullions of yellow stone deface, if that be possible, the crude red brick of its Victoria-and-Albert façade. Teutonic gargoyles leer from its high peaky gables. Its red-and-yellow chimneys are as the smoke-stacks of a factory. Iron gates (cast in the Masterson foundries), portcullis-like between granite pillars, atop of which grin the Masterson griffins, guard the formalest of formal landscape gardens, through which a laurel-bordered drive upsweeps past a pretentious lodge to a bleak terrace and ugly French windows and a nondescript porch where yet another griffin grins ludicrously from a big yellow coping-stone, whereon the architect—possibly to hide his own shame—has carved the edifying slogan, "ANNO MDCCCLXXIII ROBERTUS MASTERSON AEDIFICAVIT."

Yet—perhaps because this atrocity of atrocities stands, half

in Hampshire and half in Sussex, on a great saucer of good green grassland all round whose lip the nostrils of a man long-exiled may give him the tang of the English sea—his first sight of Mastersleigh Towers did not detract by one iota from John Masterson's happiness. The gaitered gamekeeper who "capped" him as his Daimler swept through the open lodge-gates, the men at work in the gardens, the two boys weeding in the drive, and last but not least the old housekeeper, Mrs. Arbuthnot, in her funny high-waisted silk frock with the miniature of her dead husband dangling from its gold chain on her capacious bosom, who welcomed him with the slightest of slight curtseys at the porch—all these spoke to him of his boyhood, and of something else, of an adolescent memory long since hidden behind the curtain of the years.

"What am I trying to recall?" he wondered, listening to Mrs. Arbuthnot's quiet, "It's a rare pleasure to see you, Mr. John"; looking to see what changes time had wrought in that plump-cheeked homely face.

But time seemed to have wrought no changes in Mrs. Arbuthnot. Her eyes, always bright, were bright as ever behind their twinkling spectacles. Her hair, always gray, had gone no grayer. Only in him had been change; change and the loss of one strange emotional experience which—strive though he might—he could not manage to recall.

"You'll have your sherry and your biscuit with me, won't you, Mr. John?" went on the housekeeper. "It's waiting for you in my sitting-room, now. And one of the boys'll take your bag over to The Cedars. You're sleeping there to-night, you know. At Mr. Tom's, I mean. Because this house is all upside down. Oh, and Mr. Tom said I was to tell you he'd be waiting at the stables. They've a building job on; and when they've a building job on, Mr. Tom . . . But there"—and Mrs. Arbuthnot, leading the way across the dust-sheeted hall to her own apartments, smiled as one who knows all secrets—"I never was one to gossip, was I, Mr. John?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot's sitting-room had altered as little as Mrs. Arbuthnot. Spotless antimacassars, lace curtains, shiny photographs, a bright fire, a horsehair sofa, and the glass case of stuffed magpies he had given her when a boy, still made—for John Masterson—a little refuge from the overpowering pretentiousness of the rest of the house. Nevertheless, all the time he was sipping his sherry, that elusive memory of adolescence continued to intrigue him; and presently, as they made their way out of the refuge, through the ball-room and the billiard-room and the icy-

cold winter garden, where the water had been long since drained from the gold-fish basins, he caught himself positively threshing his brain to re-capture it. It had been so fragrant, that memory —so different from every other of his wandering life.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, curtseying again, let him out of the door of the flowerless conservatory, and Masterson, his brain still questing its lost treasure, took the path through the postern-gate in the red-brick garden wall from which he and his brothers had been wont to "prig" an occasional peach.

Under the peach wall, the sun held almost the warmth of spring-time. Lingering there, he could hear two of his gardeners talking broad Sussex as they forked the earth.

He opened the gate; went through it; and spoke a few words to the pair. Their brown faces, their brown arms, their self-sure sing-song voices pleased him. But the elusive memory still haunted him; and leaving them, he walked on, through the big walled kitchen garden, and out through the second postern-gate on to rising grassland.

The grassland was bare as a plate. Cloud-shadows skimmed it. As he climbed, the wind raced to meet him. He drank deep of the wind, as he had drunk of it when a boy. Drinking, pictures thronged in his brain.

Always, in his boyhood, this had been the hill of escape; the hill beyond which were neither Parkers nor Ellisons nor plum-coloured footmen nor tutors nor governesses—but only Adventure.

The adventures of boyhood, how they came back to him! That evening stalk with his brand-new rook rifle; that camp-fire he had lit, fearful lest it should light a whole hill-side, among the bone-dry gorse; that first day's cubbing when the Huntsman had blooded him on either cheek and given him a pad; that best adventure of all, his first morning gallop with the stable-boys, the smooth-striding thoroughbred between his young knees and Tom Withers, cheering him to the echo, "Well ridden, Master John—well ridden," as the yearlings thundered by! Yet that—that other, stranger picture—would not come back.

And then, very slowly, just before he reached the top of the hill, that quested picture developed itself in Masterson's brain.

There were only two people in the picture—himself, and a girl, a very young girl, pink-handed and slim-waisted, golden-fair with the careless laugh of fifteen on her full red lips and all the happiness of childhood still dancing in her deep blue eyes. He had been twenty-six then. Or was it twenty-seven? A man of the world—at least in his own estimation. Just back from one of his sprees with Hector. Not that he cared for that particular

kind of spree. Still—one had to do what one's elders did. Perhaps it had been mere re-action—a natural revolt from those other, tawdrier women.

Anyway, though, the thing—the tiny fragrant thing—had happened. Just for an afternoon—just for a day—he had fallen in love with that young girl—with Mary Millward. He remembered waking in his long bedroom that overlooked the hill; remembered telling himself, "She's only a flapper. You can't have fallen in love with a flapper."

And yet, just for an afternoon, just for a day, life had been altogether different. Glorious!

"You utter damn fool!" muttered John Masterson, breasting the last of the slope.

He came to the top of the hill; and stood there for a little while, still lost in memory, not caring to look below. The wind was keener now. It whistled at him—whistled shrill from the sea through the gorse; and once again, as he drank of the wind, Time rolled back its curtains. Five more years, six perhaps, had gone by. He was in khaki, on leave from the Front. Mary had met him as he walked through Lipstone; invited him to tea. He had taken tea with her; talked with her for a short half-hour. She was still golden-fair, still slim of waist, still smiling. Only—only she wasn't the Mary of his fragrant dream.

"So that's that," thought John Masterson, rather pleased at having banished sentimentality; and looked down on yet another of his possessions.

§ 3

From where he stood, the racing-stables designed by Mary's father, with Tom Withers' house, white of window-frame and trim of garden, beyond, made a pure gem of purposeful architecture against the green gallops of the training-ground and the far blue line of the sea. Above their gray stone wall, which he and Bobbie had been so proud of vaulting, rose a long line of gabled loose-boxes; above these, a square clock-tower; above the blue face of the clock, a bronze bell; and above the bell, a weathervane that sparkled golden in the sun.

Two or three men were working on the clock-tower; and as Masterson, his spirits once more high, set off again, he saw a pony-trap driving fast down the grass-road to the gates in the wall.

Presently, the path he was taking dipped through Angle Copse (where he had shot his first pheasant), and he lost sight of

the stables. Angle Copse past, however, he saw them again. The pony-trap had disappeared ; and the workmen were climbing down from the tower. Mid-day struck as he made his way—walking a trifle faster than his wont—over the last hundred yards of springy turf towards the gates in the wall.

The double stable-gates, of unpainted oak, stood wide open. A stable-hand, late for his dinner, was filling a water-bucket from one of the taps in the wall of the big yard. All the loose-boxes, except one, were shuttered against the wind. Through the big archway under the clock-tower, Masterson—acknowledging the stable-hand's salute—caught sight of the pony-trap he had seen from the hill.

The pony-trap, seen at close range, looked like a farmer's cart. The thin brown horse between its shafts had not been clipped since autumn. Its harness, though clean, did not glitter. By its wheels, still in their shirt-sleeves, stood the three men who had been working in the tower. In it, the reins dangling from her gloved hands, sat a girl.

It took John Masterson, making his way along the brick-floored passage under the arch, a good thirty seconds to realize—from something familiar about the poise of the girl's head above the collar of her heavy driving-coat—that she could be none other than Mary Millward ; the best part of a minute to recover—memory once more active in him—the whole of his self-possession: and by this time, though still unperceived, he was in ear-shot of the little group.

" But I promised Mr. Withers we'd have finished by Saturday," Mary was saying in her deep, slightly over-educated voice.

" Can't help that, Miss Millward," answered one of the workmen. " Union hours is Union hours. And besides—what about that there rain last week ? "

" Well, do the best you can, won't you ? "

Puzzled—for in the old days Mary, offspring of a runaway marriage between the handsome young master-carpenter of Lipstone and the daughter of a local clergyman, had never been allowed to take any share in the then-prosperous business—Masterson listened to a few more sentences of the argument. Then, wondering why he should have hesitated so long, he stepped forward from under the archway ; and made his presence known.

The argument between Mary and her workmen ceased at his approach ; and as she turned her head towards him he was aware, forcibly, yet without emotion, that the gold hair under her black waterproof hat had darkened since his earliest recollection of it.

and that her dark-blue eyes, once so laughterful, held an older, steadier look.

"How do you do, Mr. Masterson?" she said. "They told me you were coming down, but I didn't expect to see you quite so early."

"I'm all right, thanks. And you, Miss Millward?"

"As well as one can be in the building trade." The full red lips smiled a new wry smile. "Father was killed in the War, you know. He would volunteer—though he was over fifty. So I'm carrying on."

"I'm sorry." Masterson spoke slowly, trying to recollect something she had told him when they last met. "You had other plans for yourself, hadn't you?"

"Yes." Again that wry smile. "I thought I was going to be an accountant, or a secretary, or something of that sort. I did do my eighteen months at the College. But now I'm a builder and decorator instead. Father always thought he'd come back, you see. And when—when he didn't, Mother couldn't bear the idea of giving up the house. Mother's rather an invalid, these days. She's been hoping, ever since she heard you were coming down, that you'd look in and see her."

"I will. To-morrow." Masterson was still speaking very slowly. "Tell me about your business. Does it prosper?"

"Prosper!" Mary's deep voice hardened. "How can any business prosper when they"—her dark-blue eyes glanced sideways at the three workmen who had now put on their coats and were mounting their bicycles—"won't do a decent day's work for a decent day's wage."

The girl's words—echo of those Frankie Farrar had so often spoken in Addis Ababa—were hardly out of her mouth when the rap of hoofs on brick sounded under the archway; and Tom Withers came riding in.

"Morning, Mary," called Tom, lifting an iron-hard bowler hat on a short hunting-string from his iron-gray hair; and then—his crab-apple of a clean-shaven gray-eyed face not altogether as pleased as his voice: "Mr. John, by all that's holy! My word, sir, but I wasn't expecting you for the best part of an hour."

§ 4

John Masterson was no psychologist; but even he could not help observing, as Tom Withers, having dismounted and handed over his bay cob to the stable-boy, whipped off a glove to offer

Mary his hand, a certain shy note in the trainer's voice, a certain humble gleam in the trainer's eye, which—taken in conjunction with that half-finished sentence of Mrs. Arbuthnot's, "when they've a building-job on, Mr. Tom . . ."—seemed to indicate something more than a mere interest in the repairing of the stable clock-tower.

"Plucky sort of girl, that," commented Tom Withers, as the brown trotted leisurely away.

The idea that old Tom, fifty-five if a day, might be in love, struck Masterson as vaguely humorous; and for a minute or so he did his best to draw him out. Old Tom, however, beyond vouchsafing the information that he, "did like to see anyone game," and that the building trade wasn't "all beer and skittles for a female," refused to be drawn.

"What about wetting the whistle, sir?" he went on. "Or would you care to have a look round first?"

"Oh, let's leave the look-round till afterwards," said Masterson, with an upward glance at the clock. "And by the way, Tom—since when do you call me, 'Sir'?"

"Always call owners, 'Sir,' Mr. John," answered the trainer; and then, a little of their man-and-boy camaraderie coming back, "Might get the sack if I didn't."

Masterson laughed; and Tom Withers—looking small as a jockey in his old pepper-and-salt riding suit beside his big tweed-coated owner—led the way out of the stables.

"Talking of horses," he continued, as they went across the springy turf towards his home—and was still talking on the enthralling subject when they came up a trim garden-path, and through the winter-jasmine-wreathed porch of that unpretentious gray stone house, also of Millward's designing, whose small square oak-floored hall, with its "Midnight Steeplechase" prints, its gold-lettered shields of winning "plates" and its rack of hunting, driving and cutting whips, seemed, to the entering Masterson, of even happier memory than Mrs. Arbuthnot's sitting-room.

They passed through the hall; and into the "snuggery," with its bright fire, its two armchairs, and its already laid lunch-table. But even there, even while he moved to the sideboard and extracted the key of the presentation tantalus from the flapped pocket of his striped fancy-waistcoat, old Tom's conversation continued equine.

"Horses, like drinks, aren't what they were," said he, pouring out a couple of stiff nobblers. "Take Stalactite and Stalagmite. They were a couple of fliers, if you like. I never knew

which of 'em was best—nor the public either—till we ran 'em together at Lincoln. Ninety-four that must have been. Or ninety-five. Wish we had *one* horse like 'em. For believe me "—with a glance at the few trophies of his pet hobby, chicken-farming, which decorated the sideboard—" we couldn't win an egg-laying competition, let alone a race, with any of the skins we're feeding *our* oats to nowadays."

A gaunt maid-servant, bringing a round of home-killed beef, a jar of pickles, and a steaming dish of floury potatoes, interrupted the trainer's monologue; and for a while both men contented themselves with their trenchers. But after a rhubarb tart with some fresh farmhouse cream had followed the beef, and a port bottle the tart, Tom Withers got down to serious business.

" Look here, Mr. John," said Tom Withers, pouring himself a second glass of the tawny; " now that these stables are yours, something's got to be done about them."

And, " Not for worlds," said Tom Withers, holding up his tawny to the sunlight, " not for worlds, Mr. John, would I say one word against your poor dear father. He was a good friend to me, if ever a man had one. But when it came to a question of judging horse-flesh, your poor dear father—Heaven rest his soul—had about as much idea of 'em as an unborn babe. Mind you, I'm not grumbling. *I* didn't grumble when he got mean about things and gave up the breeding altogether. A man's money's his own. If he chooses to chuck it away on cheap 'uns, I'd be the last to say him nay. But really, Mr. John, your poor dear father, especially towards the end—ever since that blasted war broke out, in fact—was a bit too much of a close proposition. Wouldn't take my advice. Wouldn't take anybody's advice. ' *I'm* not Solly Joel,' he used to say. ' *I* can't afford my couple of thou. for a yearling. But I know a good thing when I see it, Tom—and it isn't always the dearest that's the best.' However "—Tom Withers, his port finished, rose as he spoke—" it's no use *my* talking. You come along and see for yourself."

§ 5

An " eye for a horse," though there was never a stable-helper yet who didn't imagine he possessed it, is given—especially in this age of universal petrol—to about one man in every four hundred thousand. Also—though this would be heresy in the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons—that eye is born in a man's head, and not, or only very rarely, made by study. But even an eye less certain than that of the last of the male Mastersons would

have discovered—before inspecting its first half-dozen of the forty so-called racehorses in the Mastersleigh stables—that their unhappy trainer had spoken less than the truth.

"What did I tell you?" mumbled old Tom, as they went, the stable-boys in attendance, from the first loose-box to the second. And, "What did I tell you?" rumbled old Tom, as they went from the second loose-box to the third, and from the third to the fourth. And, "*As* I was telling you," grumbled old Tom, while his helper stripped its double rugs from the fifth tenant of those melancholy boxes—a washy weed of a chestnut gelding whom some sardonic breeder had christened Crimson Express. "Crimson Express, indeed! The Sanguinary South Eastern, *we* call him. Your poor dear father would have it that he'd win at Windsor. So we ran him at Windsor. Last June it was. And the Good Lord above only knows how he finished the course. That's what comes of owners going to Newmarket and buying bargains. Dead bargains!" Tom Withers spat the words on to the peat moss. "You'll see some dead bargains before we're through, Mr. John."

The helper re-rugged the Sanguinary South Eastern, and his dead father's "dead bargain," almost as though aware of his displeasure, watched Masterson with pathetic eyes as he passed on.

Yet there were weedier ones to follow—sorry beasts compared with whom, as the trainer himself admitted, Crimson Express was a positive Tetrarch.

"Look at yon, Mr. John," old Tom kept on saying, as stable-door after stable-door disclosed its disappointment. "And look at yon. I thought I *was* going to make something of this filly; but *she's* got no feet. I did think that colt would have done us a bit of good; but *he* hasn't got the wind for three furlongs. In fact, Mr. John," with a final sniff of disgust, when they reached the last box of the outer courtyard, "if you were to take my advice, which I hope to Heaven you will, you'd send the whole of that there lot to a home for lost dogs or a riding establishment for young ladies."

"I agree with you, Tom," said Masterson. "It's a sad sight."

The stables of the inner courtyard, however, presented an even sadder spectacle.

Here, in the days which even Masterson could remember, Steeljack Two, by Stalagmite out of Stealthy, the seventeen-hand roan who had sired more winners than any stallion bred at Mastersleigh, had been wont to ramp and whinny when the fillies went to their exercise. Here, one of his earliest recollections, Stealthy

herself had dropped the last of her foals—little Clytaemnestra, the bay mare with the silver blaze and the four white socks.

Here, too, had been black Minotaur, named after the yacht, who had nearly won the National; and chestnut Marvellous; and gray Mystery; and brown Merrygal; and a round dozen others, mares and stallions, who had helped his father's plum-coloured jacket and blue cap to victory. But, to-day, all those ramping stallions of his recollection, and all those upstanding mares were gone. Only in the last box but one dwelt any survivor of the great and glorious days when his father had bred his own horses—Merriman's Pride by Twice Nightly out of Merrygal; and he so ancient that even Tom could hardly tell his year in the stud book.

"Twenty-two—twenty-three—twenty-four? I don't know how old you are, do I, me lad?" crooned old Tom, fondling that gray-haired muzzle. "But you're too old to be out at grass, anyway. And your teeth want filing again. Don't grudge this one his oats, Mr. John. He was a *horse* in his day—which is more than you can say for any of the others."

"And is that the lot?" asked Masterson, deep in thought, as the trainer himself re-rugged Merriman's Pride and they left him to his aged devices.

"Well, Mr. John," Tom Withers, tapping his mahogany gaiters with his whip, permitted himself the first smile of the afternoon, "that depends. Some might say it is, and some might say it isn't. A trainer's opinion's one thing. A jockey's is another. And an owner's is a third."

"Meaning?" asked the owner, who knew Tom's funny ways of yore.

"Meaning," declared Tom, leading the way over cobbles to the last box of all, "that I'd like you to judge for yourself whether your poor dear father—and may it please his soul if he was right—did or did not buy one bargain, and a real hot bargain, too, when he gave Farmer Honisett twenty quid and a new gate into Angle Copse for The Animal."

As they approached the door of The Animal's stable, a short, rather thick-set, yet horsemanly-looking fellow, shirt-sleeved, in very worn khaki breeches and very frayed canvas gaiters, who had been lurking there ever since the rumour that Masterson was "having a look round" had run from helper to helper, touched an over-large tweed cap with a scarred hand, and said, "Good day, sir."

"Ted Luckett, Mr. John," announced the trainer. "Maybe you remember him?"

" Of course I remember Luckett." One glance at the ugly, big-mouthed, big-eared, red-cheeked, clean-shaven face under the tweed cap-peak had been enough for Masterson to recall the fame, mostly pre-war, of his father's old cross-country jockey. " How are you, Ted ? "

" Middling, sir. Middling. I'm not as young as I was. Have to do a bit of sweating to get down to the weight again. But "—jerking a not over-clean thumb at the stable-door—" I could do with another ride or two. 'Specially on the old Animal. You've got a winner in there, sir, and a National winner, too, or I don't know a hock from a halligator."

Luckett, garrulous as always, would have gone on talking. Withers, however, silenced him with a terse, " That'll do, Ted; cut the cackle ! " opened the shutter of the stable ; and, having unbolted the lower door, led the way inside.

"'The ugliest lookin' 'oss wot ever was foaled,'" quoted Withers; while Ted Luckett's scarred fingers fumbled at the surcingle-buckle. " Temper of a fiend—appetite of a bull-elephant. Kicks like a gun, too. So "—the rugs were off by now—" stand clear of his heels, Mr. John."

Masterson, standing clear of those uneasy heels while Luckett unbuckled the head-collar, and, twitching one hand round the red nostrils, the other round one of the big upstanding ears, bade The Animal, " For Gawd's sake behave yourself and don't let's have any more of your bleeding nonsense "—a command which The Animal acknowledged by baring yellow teeth, well past mark of mouth, for an impossible bite—was aware first of a wall-eye leering maliciously from the proverbial gallows'-tree of a head ; then of a long lean strawberry-roan barrel and of a forehand which might have belonged to a centaur.

" Not much to look at," he remarked, clicking as he made his cautious approach.

" But a goer," put in Tom, watching his owner.

" What's his history ? "

" Nobody knows. Honisett gave twelve-pound-fifteen for him at Petersfield Market. Property of a gentleman. Warranted a good hunter."

" Umph." Masterson, still clicking, passed an expert hand over The Animal's hocks.

The hocks, as the pasterns, were perfect ; the hindquarters, ugly though they were, matched the forehand for power. He took a step forward ; felt the big knees, the cannon-bones ; lifted a reluctant hoof, examined it, let it down ; ran his fingers up the mane ; felt the big neck-muscles taut as steel springs under the oose healthy skin.

"Umph," he said again. "What work's he been doing?"

"Ted's had him out with the hounds," explained Tom. "Three days a week ever since the season started. That's the only thing that'll keep the ego out of *his* cosmos. But what's the good of trying to hunt a second Manifesto with the sort of packs we've got in this part of the world? What I want, and what Ted here wants, is to see him over Becher's."

"Game as a game-cock in the hunting-field," cut in the jockey. "And clever as a cat, too. He'd never put a wrong foot if they ran from here to Beachy Head. Believe me, sir, he'd shew 'em a trick or two at Aintree."

"Not this year, though." Tom Withers belonged to the old school of trainers. "He won't learn enough of the game between now and the end of March—even if there were time to enter him. But next year—well I'm not so sure he mightn't win. Would you care to see him put through his paces, Mr. John? It won't take half a jiffy to clap a saddle on his back."

§ 6

Some horses won't jump at all, some merely jump, others leap. But the horse in a thousand flies its fences as fences should be flown—hocks under belly, a lift of the forehand, and a clean spring with neck straight and forefeet outstretched cat-like for the landing. And of such, as Ted Luckett demonstrated under the red glow of a Sussex sunset, was that ugliest of ugly "skins," the wall-eyed Animal.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ 1

NEXT day, watching the smoke of his after-breakfast pipe curl blue into the chill morning air from under the jasmine-wreathed porch, John Masterson was again aware, and keenly, of his millionairedom.

Certain confidences, too—imparted overnight as he and Tom sat late in the snuggery—seemed to shew the complications of that particular estate even more clearly than his interview with Haringford and Carfax.

"Don't you run away with the idea that because your poor dear father couldn't buy horses, he couldn't buy property," Tom had said. "When it came to any other kind of a bargain, he was as shrewd as they make 'em. You'll see some things that'll surprise you, I'll lay, Mr. John, when you come to go through his books."

It appeared, also, from another scrap of information which his trainer let out over his whiskey—the case of Farmer "Smoky" Honisett, to whom three years' rent had been remitted on the day after his son was killed at Ypres—that the "Skipper" had been generous as well as shrewd; and, thinking over both these qualities, Masterson felt still more puzzled as to his father's character.

"Curious old boy," he speculated, knocking out the dottel of his pipe on the heel of his boot. "Did he just go on making money for the fun of the thing?" Which speculation still in mind, and breakfast by now being cleared away, he returned to the snuggery for a wrestle with the stable accounts.

But the more Masterson wrestled with the stable accounts, the more they threw him; and after half an hour of brain-fag he was delighted by the interruption of Hockey, his head gamekeeper, who appeared, spaniel at heel and gun under arm, to discuss "Phisints."

He had done his best with the "phisints," announced Samuel

Hockey, dry-shaving his black beard with a gnarled hand. But "phisints," as "Musser John" knew as well as anybody, cost money. What was wanted for next season—and the sooner they was put on order the better—was eggs.

"Five or six thousand, us ought to buy," declared Samuel Hockey. "And if you want we to get 'em out of cover, Musser John, there's a powerful lot of timber to be cut between now and next October."

Masterson—Hockey, junior game-keeper at the time, had shewn him how to clean his first twelve-bore—yielded to the entreaty; and was just wondering at his own extravagance when Tom Withers, who had been out with his apology for a "string," breezed into the snuggery.

"We've just put The Animal and Crimson Express together," announced Tom, flinging his whip on the table. "Believe me, The Animal had the old South Eastern whacked to the wide. He was a bit slow off the mark, though; and didn't quite seem to know what was wanted of him. So I think—and I hope you will agree—that the sooner he sees what a 'chase is like, the better. Personally, I'm for Sandown. The April meeting. Why not wire his entry now, and have done with it? I can write the confirmation to-night."

The trainer, after rummaging some minutes among the litter of papers on his desk, finally succeeded in finding a telegraph form.

"Shall we let Luckett ride him?" asked Masterson.

"Break Ted's heart if we don't," answered Withers, addressing the wire. "Same as it'll break mine if you ask me to go on training the rest of the bunch. What you ought to do, Mr. John—that's to say if it runs to it—is to start the breeding again."

§ 2

The village of Lipstone—an up-and-down, round-and-about sort of a townlet, with a sixteenth century church at its one end and a twentieth century Trust House at its other—lies a good ten miles from Mastersleigh Towers, over roads better suited for light horse traffic than for heavy high-powered cars.

Accordingly it was very nearly a quarter to one by the time that John Masterson—detained first by his farewell to Mrs. Arbuthnot, and next by Gamekeeper Hockey, who signalled the car at Woods Corner, and, having stopped it, insisted on shewing him "the state of some of they covers"—found himself speeding down from the war-memorial on the flint wall of the churchyard,

past the grocer's shop with its lollipops and the butcher's shop with its pork and the Congregational Hall with its hideous tin roof, to where the oak sign, " W. J. Millward, Builder, Cabinet-maker and Contractor," still hung, a trifle the worse for weather, over the gray stone gateway of Millward's Yard.

Fifty yards on from this gateway, fronting the road, stood the house where he had had tea with Mary in the long-ago days of the war ; and, on the steps of this house, a little red-cheeked servant-girl, already in her cap and apron, who informed him, as his Daimler braked to a standstill, " The mistress sends her compliments, sir. And will you come in, or would you care to see Miss Mary first ? Miss Mary, sir," indicating the yard, " is over there."

Masterson, who had not forgotten Mary's mother, elected for " Miss Mary first " ; and, telling Rogers to wait, walked back towards the sign. Walking, he remembered something his father had once said about " Handsome Jack," as Lipstone had nicknamed Millward. " Millward's got grit," his father had said, " and he's got brains. But he made the mistake of a life-time when he married that she-skeleton of a parson's daughter with her finicking ideas about being a lady, instead of a good, fat, honest woman of his own class."

One knock proved the office empty except for a sulky-faced boy who informed him, " Her's somewhere about. In the sheds, maybe " ; and strolling on, Masterson saw a picture of a business struggling against defeat. The whole yard looked woebegone. The stables, which had once housed their three teams, held only the thin brown. In place of the three timber-waggons stood only one dilapidated Ford lorry. The wood-stacks, under their corrugated iron lean-tos, had shrunk to mere vestiges of their former opulence. Yet the whole place—though this only added to its woebegoneness—was in scrupulous order. Even the iron-dump seemed to have been newly tidied.

He strolled on, past the wood-stacks and the iron-dump, and some old oak beams, stacked tidily as the iron, and a heap of cherry-coloured bricks, towards the long thatched shed which bounded the yard. Through the open windows of the shed came the noise of a buzz-saw at work on wood ; and through its open door, he perceived Mary.

Mary, the hem of a blue skirt just shewing under her white overall, was handling the petrol-engine of the buzz-saw. Looking up from her lever, she signalled to him to enter ; then signalled to the two men at the saw-bench, who had also looked up, that they should get on with their jobs.

Masterson entered the shed ; and waited, his ears deafened by the phut of the engine, the drone of the saw and the whine of the wood as plank after plank met the ripping steel, till the work should finish. Waiting, he was struck by Mary's competence ; by the crisp decision of her orders to the men ; by the resolute way in which she handled her lever.

At last, the final plank slid to the saw. At last, Mary switched off and dismissed her workmen to their dinner. " Sorry," she said, offering a wiped hand. " But I can't afford an engineer."

She motioned him out of the shed ; locked it ; and led the way back through the yard. Masterson began to question her about the business. To-day, however, she seemed disinclined for confidences. " No," she answered, " things weren't good." " Yes," she answered, " she'd had to give up the cabinet-making." " Of course," she answered, " she'd been having a lot of trouble with labour."

Back in the office, she changed the conversation, asking, with some abruptness :

" Mr. Masterson, had the newspapers come before you left Mastersleigh ? "

The sulky-faced boy, who had listened to the end of their talk, looked up open-mouthed at the mention of Masterson's name ; and Mary, having sent him about his business, went on : " The *Post's* on Father's desk—in case you haven't seen it."

Masterson, a trifle astonished at the emphasis with which she had spoken, picked up the *Daily Post*, open at the leader page —and for a while fell silent.

For the effect of that which modern civilization calls " publicity " on unsophisticated minds is peculiar ; and as the big headlines, ANOTHER WINDFALL FOR THE EXCHEQUER. RACE-HORSE OWNER'S FIVE MILLIONS. FORTUNE LEFT TO YOUNGEST SON, flashed him their personal message, he could not help experiencing a certain smarting of the eye-balls, a certain dryness of the mouth, a certain anger. The thing, seen in cold print, was so—so infernally blatant. People, " these newspaper people," had no right to pry into his family affairs, to publish the details of his war-service, or the fact that his father had been " affectionately christened ' The Skipper ' by his intimates."

Aware that Mary was watching him, he controlled his annoyance and put down the paper, saying as he did so, " It's rather awful, isn't it ? My solicitor told me he couldn't keep the will out of the papers ; but I never imagined they'd make so much fuss about it."

"It's rather awful for us," laughed Mary—and her laugh seemed to restore the confidence of other days. "We're not used to entertaining millionaires, you know; and Mother—she expects you'll stop to lunch, by the way—ever since she saw the paper this morning, has been in a positive panic."

"She can't have been in the panic I was when I first heard about the thing," countered Masterson.

"But why were you in a panic?"

"Oh, I don't know. Somehow it doesn't seem right that one should have so much money."

"I don't think I should worry about that if it were mine. If I had even one per cent of five millions . . ."

Mary Millward, laughing no longer, bit off the rest of her sentence; but Masterson's imagination, suddenly active, filled in the unspoken end.

"What would you do in that case?" he prompted.

Mary, however, remained dumb—her lips working and a strange anxiety in her blue eyes.

"I wish you'd tell me," went on Masterson, "if there's any way in which I can help——"

"Nobody can help, Mr. Masterson." The interruption came swiftly, bitterly, the words tumbling over one another as waves under the wind. "I'm a woman, and no woman can handle *this* business. *I* can't sit about drinking with County Councillors, and if I don't, how can I get contracts for the County Council houses? Besides, even if I were to get a contract, I couldn't handle it. Labour wouldn't let me. They, the politicians, I mean, talk a lot about the rights of Labour these days; but they never suggest that the working man owes any duty to the people who pay him his wages. Or even to his own class. For sheer downright selfishness, commend me to the 'honest British working man.' I know; because I tried to teach our ex-soldiers bricklaying—and the Union wouldn't have it. With ten thousand new houses wanted in this district alone! So the ex-soldiers are drawing the dole instead. That's England, Mr. Masterson. Ask yourself how long the country's going to last."

And on that, Mary Millward, having said a good deal more than she intended, led the way to lunch.

§ 3

Houses, unlike their owners, have little reticence; and the small, square, pseudo-Georgian house which "Handsome Jack" built for his runaway bride still told—though neither Masterson's

mind nor Mary's possessed sufficient imagination to perceive it—the whole tragedy of his marriage.

Outwardly, from the eighteenth-century brass knocker of its red-painted door, to the figured cistern pipes of its tiled roof, that house was as perfect as peasant craftsmanship could make it. Its window-frames, iron-wrought at Lipstone forge, though not exact to period, were exact to purpose. Its bricks were ripe of colour, and pointed after the old fashion; the fanlight of its entrance might have been genuine Adams. Indeed, contemplating that exquisite exterior the imaginative mind might say, and not without truth, "Built by an artist for the love of a woman."

But once through that red-painted door, the handiwork of the woman who had been loved by the artist betrayed itself. In the square, exactly proportioned hall—out of which there opened three mahogany doors, each of whose white lintels was a hand-carved masterpiece—half-a-dozen potted ferns drooped from a bamboo stand. The doormat on which Mary and Masterson wiped their boots bore the legend, "Salve!" And the carpet across which they went into that parlour which Mrs. Millward always insisted must be called her "drawing-room," matched, to a hideous nicety, the "so genteel" lace curtains which disfigured the embrasured windows.

At their entrance, Mary's mother—one of those frail, querulous, old-before-their-time women, who still manage, Heaven knows how, to impress us with the idea that they have once been "pretty"—rose twittering from a sofa so exquisitely copied that it might have been genuine Heppelwhite (and so execrably covered that it might have been veritable Tottenham Court Road); and said, extending a flabby hand, "Mr. Masterson, this is indeed a pleasure. I do hope you are going to add to it by remaining for lunch."

"It's most kind of you," began Masterson. "If I may, I'll just tell my chauffeur to get something at the inn."

"Oh, please," protested Mrs. Millward, "I'm sure we can manage . . ."

Mrs. Millward's guest, however, insisted; and by the time he came back to the drawing-room, Mary had disappeared.

"I condole with you," went on Mary's mother, her thin lips pursed to the semblance of a smile, and her blue eyes watery with false sentiment under their pale lashes. "To lose so near a relative is indeed a tragedy. I remember when *my* father died—I'm afraid, poor man, that he never really got over the shock of my marrying into a sphere so different from his own—that I was dazed, positively dazed with grief."

"Really," put in the uncomfortable Masterson.

"Yes—really—quite dazed. But still," Mrs. Millward's voice brightened a conventional semitone, "at least you have this consolation, that your father—as my father always used to put it, he was a Keble man, you know, and played cricket for his college—had a most magnificent innings. Ninety-four, Mr. Masterson. Ninety-four, not out—as Father would have said. Wonderful. Truly wonderful."

Mrs. Millward, once warmed to her subject, twittered on for some unanswerable sentences. Then, brightness altogether swallowing gloom, she cut the condolences; and continued: "And so, you, the youngest son, succeed to his entire estate. Now, isn't that romantic! Isn't that too wonderfully romantic! As I said to Mary when we first saw it in the papers this morning, 'It reads more like a novel than real life.'"

Novels (a *Family Herald* story entitled "From Castle to Cottage—or The Girl who never Regretted" had, as she occasionally admitted to her private soul, been the prime cause of her amazing marriage) happened to be Mrs. Millward's hobby; and she continued to prattle fiction—while Masterson, growing more uncomfortable every moment, stood silent by the mantelpiece—till Mary returned. Whereupon—a tinny bell ringing without—she re-arose from her sofa; patted the scrap of machine-made lace at the flat bosom of her figured silk afternoon dress, and begged her guest, with a little deprecatory cough, to "accompany" them to their "frugal meal."

§ 4

To John Masterson, that meal—served in the white-panelled dining-room which had been one of "Handsome Jack's" particular prides, from finicky willow-pattern plates which Mrs. Millward, in the dim days of her prettiness, had insisted to be "just the thing"—though well enough cooked and by no means frugal, proved the least appetising he had ever eaten.

Like most Englishmen, he had little aptitude for hatred; yet no one could have helped hating the snobbery of this faded, futile woman, whose conversation, interlarded with constant references to "Keble," "my darling Father, the Vicar," and "the lunch-parties dear Mother used to give at the sweet old Vicarage," reduced the dutiful Mary, so resolute at her saw-bench, to a mere dumb, bread-crumbling cipher—or, worse still, to a smiling idiot of no character at all.

All the same when, some hour and a half later, his Daimler crossed the Sussex border and headed away from Hazlemere to rejoin the Portsmouth Road, John Masterson was still thinking, and thinking his hardest, about Mary Millward.

The girl's (shouldn't he rather say " the woman's " ?) attitude towards life appeared of curious interest.

In one way she seemed purely masculine, believing, so far as he could gather from the last little conversation which they had had together—Mrs. Millward full of excuses about " these awful headaches of mine " finally retiring to her bedroom—in his own creed of duty.

Yet in her case, the masculine sense of duty was complicated by a purely feminine sentiment.

" There's a proverb about setting one's hand to the plough, Mr. Masterson," she had said, not wistfully but with the clear-cut forthright vehemence of one who knows her own mind, in answer to the direct question, " But why, with your education, don't you find some easier way of making a living than the building trade ? " which he had dared put to her. " That proverb was Father's favourite, and it's mine. Besides, there's Mother. She pretends to hate Lipstone. But she'd never be really happy away from it."

" Sacrificing herself," decided Masterson ; and so deciding managed to dismiss her from his mind.

By now, at half-past three of a winter's afternoon, with rain-clouds lowering above, the dusk had begun to fall ; and presently, as darkness closed in and Rogers switched on his big head-lamps, his mind veered to introspection. Forty minutes ahead, lay Town—the dinner with Starleigh, who would have read all that " disgusting stuff " in the newspapers—Euphemia—Haringford and Carfax—all the thousand-and-one complications of his plutocratic life.

" Curse Town," he thought suddenly. " If I've got to live in England, I'd be far happier in the country."

And by the time Rogers had dismounted from his driving-seat to tug at the gigantic door-bell of Carlton House Terrace, John Masterson's brief holiday-mood had altogether evaporated. " Ridiculous," he thought, handing his cap and coat to the butler, who handed them to his flunkeys. " Absurd," he thought, listening to his butler's, " Miss Euphemia's compliments, sir. And she would be glad if you could spare her a few minutes in her own apartments." " Childish," he thought, letting his butler summon his page-boy for his lift, and escort him—the lift decanting them on the fourth floor—towards the ornate door of

Euphemia's sitting-room. "I'm living like a nincompoop, not like a man."

Euphemia's door opened to a querulous, "Is that you, John? If so, you may come in"; and, bowed through it, into the little knick-knack crowded octagonal room, he discovered his aunt, her crochet-hook idle in her mittened hands, stiff-backed in her gold chair before the fire.

"John," began his aunt, the moment they were alone, "John, have you seen the newspapers? Have you seen those horrible newspapers? You went away on purpose, I suppose. *Most* unfair of you, I think it. There've been dreadful people—reporters—calling all day. And then the telephone! It's positively never stopped ringing. And poor dear Ellison's so deaf that he never can understand the simplest message. And that odious creature, Haringford, has asked for you three times, I believe. And *The Planet*—— Oh, John, *The Planet* of all papers—and my brother Robert a Tory all his life,"—here the octogenarian hands trembled so that they dropped their crochet-hook—"when they heard you weren't at home, had the audacity, the disgusting audacity, to ask for *me*."

"And did you speak to them?" asked Masterson, striving to hide his amusement.

"No, I did not. I only wish I had now. Look, just look, John." Here the old lady, her excitement boiling rapidly to hysteria, drew out the offending periodical from under that part of her which was unmentionable in the literature of her own period, and thrust it forward for Masterson's inspection. "Parker brought it to me just after I'd had my nap—though why Parker should want an afternoon paper, unless he bets, I'm sure *I* don't know. And it says—— But you can see what it says for yourself, John. It says I'm *ninety*. And I shan't be eighty-seven till July. And oh, John, John, what are we going to do now that everybody knows exactly how much we're worth? Robert always said that was fatal, positively fatal. And so it is. John"—desperately, Euphemia spoke her worst—"I suppose *you* haven't even bothered to think what excuse we're going to make—now that everybody knows how rich we are—if one of the maid-servants wants her wages raising."

§ 5

It took John Masterson the best part of half-an-hour—not to mention the assistance of Miss Pettery, her scrawny but competent maid—to calm the hysterical Euphemia; and by the

time he had coaxed her, more or less comforted, to an early couch and an early dinner (" Just a mouthful of soup, please, Pettery, and a fried sole, and, if you think I ought to have it, John, one little glass of Madeira,") in the adjoining bedroom, it was too late to telephone Haringford and time to dress for Starleigh's dinner-party.

" Rather a bore," he thought, going to his big gloomy bedroom where both Menelik, busy extracting the tissue paper from the sleeves of his *Frangi's* brand-new " dreshout," and the Martinet, busy with his dreams by the fireside, welcomed him as though he had been absent for at least a year. " Yes. Decidedly a bore. But then everything's a bore when one's got too much money."

And that mood was still on him when, punctually at half-past eight, he stepped from another of his Daimlers to see, from under the huge umbrella with which the huge door-porter at Ciro's was shielding his new top-hat against the beating rain—a clear picture in the bright light of the hall beyond the revolving door—Rupert Starleigh, a gardenia in the button-hole of his dress-coat, and close to Rupert Starleigh, a girl . . . a girl with raven-dark hair and a pale, laughing face, whom he could not help recognizing, even at first glance, for the unknown Irene.

CHAPTER NINE

§ 1

"IRENE, this is John Masterson. Masterson, this is Irene Carslake."

Rupert Starleigh, his gray eyes at their merriest, and his whole air that of a man determined on his evening's spree, had made the unconventional introduction a considerable second before John Masterson—his top-hat in his left hand, his right outstretched to touch the rosy finger-tips of the laughing girl—could recover his full self-possession.

"I'm delighted to meet Mr. Masterson," she said; and, even in that first moment of their acquaintanceship, he was aware, thrillingly, of her attractions. Seen thus at close range she appeared so much more beautiful than the vision which his subconscious mind must have been carrying ever since their chance meeting in Piccadilly, that—for another second—he caught himself actually doubting the identity of the small, proudly-set head, with its casque of raven-dark hair, shingled at the white nape, but curling iridescent over the tiny ears to frame a perfectly oval face, whose nose Phidias himself might have chiselled from the Grecian marble while Apelles' own brush (and no mere modern lip-stick !) tipped the straight mouth with his lost carmine above the soft contours of the dimpled chin.

Yet the girl—though younger than he had imagined her; almost, in spite of her poise, a child—was indubitably the same; and, for still a third second, while his eyes, refusing hers, took in the swift picture of a small exquisitely shaped body, swathed in some mauve and gold tissue, which enhanced the pale perfection of a skin, whiter even than the flowers with which he had originally compared it, till bare neck and bare shoulders shimmered almost as pearls shimmer under the warm lights of the hall, John Masterson's self-possession would not entirely come back. Then, for just one ultimate fraction of time, as their eyes at last met, it deserted him completely.

For in those eyes—" eyes coloured like the water-flower and

deeper than the green sea's glass "—there flashed, and quite unmistakably, a message of recognition. "So it's you," they seemed to be saying. "You!"

That message vanished, almost before Masterson had time to read it, under a flutter of long black lashes which set every nerve in his body quivering with a sudden rush of strangely uncomfortable emotion; and, by the time he had controlled himself, the girl, still completely at her ease, had turned back to Starleigh.

"Here's Jill," she announced, while Masterson, assisted by a blue-uniformed cloak-room attendant, shrugged himself out of his coat.

Jill, Lady Fernshaw, Starleigh's widowed sister, a large and voluptuous blonde, slightly over-pearled, slightly out of breath, and very much over-powdered, swept into the hall like a tornado; and, having embraced Irene, fell upon Masterson with effusion.

"Late!" bubbled Lady Fernshaw. "But not so very. I couldn't get out of my bath. I never can get out of my bath. That's why I'm losing my figure. And something's been left undone that ought to have been done up. As usual! Irene—follow me and prevent the worst."

The two women vanished, arm-in-arm, through the open doorway of the cloak-room, and a moment or so later—the little hall being by now already filled with chattering women and tie-patting men—Starleigh was introducing Masterson to two more of his guests.

"Cynthia Trevor," said Starleigh, and repeated his formula, "You remember Tom Trevor," while a somewhat taller, somewhat older, somewhat less attractive and distinctly harder edition of Irene Carslake upturned brown eyes to Masterson's blue. "And this is Ivor. Cynthia's brother Ivor. How's work, Ivor? Found anything to do yet?"

"Not a damn thing!"

Ivor Carslake, obviously a University and Public School product, who resembled, especially about the eyes, his elder rather than his younger sister, disappeared up the staircase; and Starleigh followed him, leaving Cynthia Trevor and Masterson alone.

"You're *the* Masterson, aren't you?" asked Cynthia. "Masterson of Abyssinia? I was reading about you just before we started. Lucky man! I wish Tom were a millionaire."

The remark, as the look which accompanied it, jarred; making Masterson self-conscious. Answering it as lightly as he could, he began to feel uncomfortable. It seemed to him that his

new dress-suit didn't fit; that it pinched him under the arms; that his white waistcoat, when compared with the waistcoats of the other men in the hall, was the height of unfashionableness. "Fish out of water," he thought. "That's what I am in this *galère*." Then—the party re-uniting—he forgot self-consciousness in sheer admiration of Irene.

Irene, unlike her married sister, seemed to possess tact. Her eyes, having flashed him their one unmistakable message, were now veiled. She looked modest, he thought—altogether the girl, and not at all the woman—and began to talk with her, trivially about trivial things, taking pleasure in her quick wit, while they waited for the last of their guests.

"But who *are* we waiting for?" he asked her after five more minutes.

"Only for Major Rose," put in Cynthia Trevor, flirting a huge green fan from her seat on the long sofa under the window; and added, with a curious note in her voice, "Not forgetting, of course, our friend Rose's lady."

"Would that be Adrian Rose, by any chance?" queried Masterson, suddenly remembering the poster he had seen from the Pullman window on the night of his return.

"Yes. *Adrian* Rose." Irene's treble voice stressed the christian name. "Here he is. *I* simply adore him. And so does Cynthia."

"*A quoi bon?*" muttered Cynthia Trevor; and just as she spoke, Masterson, looking easily over Ivor Carslake's head from his stand by the jewellery show-case, saw a very large, very lavishly illuminated limousine slide to a stop in the rain-drizzle before the revolving door.

Out of this limousine there sprang, first a very tall chauffeur, then a little blonde woman in an ermine cloak, and lastly a thick-set man of medium age and medium height whose arrival in the vestibule caused a miniature commotion.

Apparently, Rose objected to standing in the rain: for the tall chauffeur followed him indoors to receive his orders; and while he was receiving them the telephone attendant, an obvious message in her hand, came running out of her box almost into collision with the secretary who came running out of his office. The commotion, however, did not seem to touch Rose, whose voice, slightly deeper than Masterson remembered it, was almost military in its precise, "Eleven o'clock," to the tall chauffeur; its decisive, "If he rings up again, say I'm not here," to the telephone attendant; and its firm, "Yes. That's right. I did promise I'd sign them in," to the relieved secretary.

Meanwhile, the little blonde woman in the ermine cloak was already apologizing to Starleigh and his sister.

"Adrian's *so* sorry," apologized the little blonde woman, her head high but her voice a trifle diffident. "Do forgive us for being so rude. But there's been some trouble at the theatre, and we simply could *not* get away from Adelphi Terrace till Adrian had finished telephoning."

"Yes. There's always trouble in a theatre. How d'you do, Jill? How d'you do, Starleigh? How d'you do, everyone else?" Adrian Rose, his fur coat and top-hat already handed to the attendant, came forward while Mrs. Rose was still at her apologies; and a moment or so later, having noticed Masterson, went on, grasping him firmly by the hand, "My word, you have altered. If Rupert hadn't warned me you were coming, I don't believe I should have recognized you."

"Nor I, you," said Masterson.

And indeed, the twenty odd years since their last meeting seemed to have changed Rose beyond all belief. Some tremendous experience—the War perhaps (the trace of a shrapnel-wound still shewed white against the swarth of skin under the slightly grayed hair at his left temple); or possibly some more personal trouble (every now and then one caught a look almost of tragedy under-lurking the hard black surface of those alert and purposeful eyes)—had transformed the pallid, rather weedy youth of Masterson's recollection into a forceful rock of a man, just over-long in the arm, and just over-broad in the shoulder, who looked, despite the jet-black moustache clipped to a tight line between the big, only slightly Hebraic nostrils and the big, though even less Hebraic, mouth, far more like an old-time prize-fighter than a modern playwright.

"Oh, I—I'm all out of condition. Fat as butter! Never get any exercise these days," continued Rose. "By the way, you haven't met my wife. Isobel, let me introduce Mr. Masterson. You've often heard me mention him. He was an awful blood at m'tutor's. Stroked the house four, if my memory's correct."

"Yes. And lost my chance of the eight by taking so much trouble over it," laughed Masterson, still mindful of the first pitfall into which the social conscience had dropped him, while Mrs. Adrian—who always hated that particular form of introduction—did her best to smile.

§ 2

Eton, whatever the so-called modern educationalists may say against her, forges strong links between the majority of her sons; and those links were still binding John Masterson to Adrian Rose when, at exactly nine o'clock, they followed the remainder of the party through the big glass doors of the restaurant and right across the floor to Starleigh's long sofa table under the gallery.

"You're the blood, nowadays," he chaffed, as Rose exchanged here a bow and there a smile with some dozen different diners. "Do you know everybody in the place?"

"Not half of 'em," laughed back Rose, once more bowing. "But it's part of my business to pretend that I do."

"You don't mean to say you call play-writing a business?"

"You wouldn't call it an art if you knew as much about the rotten job as I do."

The truth of the remark missed Masterson, as did a scrap of gossip ("But, my dear, everyone in London knows *that* story") at the next table while they were taking their seats—his own between Irene Carslake and her sister; with Rupert Starleigh on Irene's left.

"And now," began Cynthia Trevor, helping herself plentifully to the caviare, "I want to know all about Abyssinia. Is it really *wild?* Are the Abyssinians really the Lost Tribe? Oh—and would it be a good place for Tom to go big-game shooting?"

"The shooting *is* rather good," admitted Masterson.

"How splendid. And is it a long way away? It is. That's better still. Because," Cynthia's eyes, glancing sideways, sought to inveigle Rose's, "the farther away Tom is, the happier *I* am."

Irene, however, and not Rose, took up her sister's challenge, with a sharp, "Oh, leave the wretched Tom alone for one evening, Cynthie. He isn't half bad as husbands go nowadays."

"Isn't he?" Cynthia shrugged her fine shoulders. "That's all you know about it. How'd you like to be stammered at when you're getting into bed?"

Tom Trevor's wife rattled on till the appearance of the bortch; and listening, Masterson's dislike of her grew. He looked at Irene; wondered, fleetingly, whether she understood the matrimonial innuendoes; decided, from one remark, that she did; decided, from another, that she didn't; and was still speculating about her with far more interest than he had ever before experienced in a young girl when Cynthia, who appreciated food, abandoned salacity and applied herself to the *sole diable*.

Then, Irene turning to their host, he subsided into one of his usual contemplative silences.

There was something to be said—he decided during that contemplative silence—for this particular kind of existence; for good food, and good drink, and good music (by now the violinist was playing), and the society of well-dressed women. At least, it took a man out of himself; made him forget his difficulties. And gradually, following on that decision, there fell on him the first mood of complete well-being with which London had ever provided him. "I'm happy," he concluded suddenly. "I'm really enjoying myself." After which, for no particular reason that he could imagine, his mind momentarily reverted to Mary Millward.

"A penny, a whole twopence for your thoughts, Mr. Masterson." Irene, turning from their host, who promptly devoted himself to Mrs. Adrian, broke in on his reverie.

"I was thinking about a girl," he admitted with his usual frankness.

"About me?" The flirtatious answer came quick as a flash.

"No. About a girl I was talking to this afternoon."

He began, with a little less than his usual diffidence, to tell her something of Mary Millward; while she, her lashes fluttering, made no comment. This was a strange man—the strangest man she had ever met. In her world, or rather Cynthia's, flirtatious questions did not go without their flirtatious answer. And besides, surely this John Masterson hadn't forgotten . . .

After he had finished telling her a little about Mary, she started in to tell him a little about herself; and about "Mother" and "Father" who were "quite antediluvian" and lived "somewhere near Land's End, poor dears"; and was still talking when a slight altercation between Jill Fernshaw and Ivor Carslake attracted both their attentions.

"That's all very well, Jill," Ivor was saying. "But there is something to be said for what the Socialists are driving at. After all, if you can once manage to abolish competition——"

"Abolish competition!" Rose, deserting Cynthia, butted abruptly into the argument. "You might as well talk of abolishing the human race."

"Oh, I know what you mean." Carslake spoke lightly. "Competition is the life of trade, etcætera, etcætera. But isn't all that John Stuart Mill stuff rather out of date? We must have progress, don't you know. And progress——"

"Progress?" Rose's interruption silenced the entire table.

"Socialism isn't progress. It's retrogress. Socialism is the doctrine of the Weary Willies and the Tired Tims. Socialism——"

"Hear, hear!" broke in Starleigh. "Ladies and gentlemen, pray charge your glasses. The toast is the Tory Party, coupled with the name of Major Adrian Rose, D.S.O., M.C."

"Rupert," said Adrian Rose, "don't be a silly ass."

"I won't be. If you two'll keep off politics."

Carslake, however, refused to take his host's hint.

"The worst of you Die-Hards," drawled Ivor Carslake, "is that you won't see the other side of the case. Now we Liberals——"

"Liberalism," burst out Rose—and Masterson, watching the woman who bore the playwright's name, saw her wince at the vehemence of the word—"is dead. Dead and buried and stinking and corrupt."

"Poetic thought," muttered Rupert Starleigh.

"But Socialism," went on Rose, "isn't. Socialism's a live poison, injected into the veins of the young by people whose one object is anarchy and the destruction of the British Empire."

"Hear! Hear!" This time the mock applause came from Cynthia Trevor.

"Still, you must admit it's a fashionable poison," went on her brother.

"Fashionable!" boomed Rose, thumping the table with his clenched fist. "Of course it's fashionable. Anything that's damned idiotic is fashionable in England nowadays. I'm a fashionable playwright, God help me, and my wife's fashionably dressed . . ."

"Adrian! Please!"

But the appeal of Mrs. Adrian's words, as the appeal in Mrs. Adrian's cornflower-blue eyes, went unnoticed except by the watchful Masterson; and the deep booming voice of the playwright continued:

"Everything's fashionable in post-war England except common decency. Especially High Treason. We've a round dozen Communists, and the Lord knows how many other traitors, in the House of Commons to-day. Any other country would have shot 'em years ago. But we haven't got the guts for that. So we give 'em four hundred a year, instead. Plus the right to talk, *and print*, all the sedition that's seething in their dirty souls. And then we pat ourselves on the back for our broad-mindedness. Broad-mindedness, indeed."

Rose, utterly oblivious of the fact that his rhetorical outburst had now stopped conversation not only at his own table but

at all the adjoining ones, fulminated on; and listening to him Masterson's brain registered the purest amazement. "The man's mad," he thought.

Yet that there was some reason in the man's madness—and something more than reason, the fire of the born orator—Masterson's fair-mindedness could not deny. He was holding his audience, too. The people at the adjoining tables, the people at their own, were staring like people in a theatre. Even the waiters had ceased to serve.

And then, for no apparent reason, the deep voice stopped in mid sentence; the spell broke; and chatter, the relieved chatter of folk who have been labouring under the stress of pent emotions, re-mingled with the subdued clatter of dishes, the subdued notes of the violin, and all those other sounds which betoken civilization at its dinner.

§ 3

"Amazing person, our friend Rose!" commented Cynthia Trevor when, some half hour later, after cigars were lit, the playwright and his lady had momentarily absented themselves from the table. "No manners, and," her thin lips pursing to a smile, "hardly any morals worth speaking of. But fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. He really *is* a patriot, you know; means every word he says; and his courage must be simply terrific. Tom was with him at Passchendaele—the day he got a bar to his D.S.O. Tom always will have it that they'd have given him the V.C. if he hadn't been a Jew."

"Oh, that wasn't the reason at all," began Jill Fernshaw with a meaning look.

The re-appearance of the Roses, however—Irene with them—stopped further gossip; and presently Masterson, whose mind had been rather more stirred than he was willing to admit by the playwright's oratory, forgot politics.

Irene—dinner once over, the floor cleared, and dancing begun—seemed unwilling to leave him. "You know I hate dancing just after a meal, Rupert," she said to Starleigh. "Besides, I want to talk to Mr. Masterson—if he'll give me a cigarette."

Masterson gave her the cigarette and a kindled match; watched her while she lit up. By now, the rest of their party were all away; and, alone with her at the long glass-littered table, he experienced a certain shyness. Her very youth made him feel awkward, tongue-tied, clumsy.

" Are you bored with me ? " she asked suddenly. " Or do you just like not talking ? Or do you want to dance ? "

" I'm afraid I can't dance," answered Masterson, looking away from her towards the floor. " At least not these new steps. Do you mind ? "

" No. If I did, I shouldn't be sitting here."

" That's honest of you, anyway."

" Why shouldn't I be honest ? " Her eyes sought his ; and, almost, in that moment, he summoned up the courage to ask her whether she remembered their previous meeting.

That courage, however, would not quite come to the sticking point ; and, after a pauseful suck at his cigar, he said : " But women aren't usually . . ."

" Honest ? "

" Yes."

" How can they be ? " His frankness did not seem to have annoyed her. " As a rule, they haven't any money. You can't," laughing, " be really honest unless you pay cash. Cash for everything, I mean. Not only frocks."

He asked, feeling more at his ease, what exactly she did mean ; but she only ground out the butt of her cigarette on her plate, saying, " I don't think it matters what one does, so long as one's willing to pay for it " ; and left him to puzzle out the rest.

" But according to your theory," he said at last, " a murderer's justified as soon as he's hanged."

" Only if he admits to the murder—and doesn't try to escape, or get himself proved not guilty."

" I see."

" You don't really." She fell silent ; and following the direction of her gaze it appeared to him that she was watching her sister.

" Mrs. Trevor dances well," he ventured.

" Anyone can dance with Rupert," she answered ; and fell silent again—thinking how much she liked this strange unsubtle person ; while he—all unaware of the processes at work in him—regarded now her, and now the dancing.

The modern steps, altogether different from any he remembered, struck him as curiously, almost improperly, intimate.

" I've come back to a funny kind of world," he said to himself ; and aloud, once more regarding the rather thoughtful face of his companion, " Tell me ! Don't people Boston nowadays ? "

" Boston ! " Irene answered absent-mindedly. " No. At least I don't think so. What is a Boston ? "

"It's a kind of a waltz. Everybody was dancing it the last time I lived in London."

"When was that?"

"Let me see—nineteen-twelve it must have been."

"Nineteen twelve! Why, I was only six then. I say—you are a bit of a Rip van Winkle."

"Am I?"

"Of course he's a bit of a Rip van Winkle." Starleigh and Cynthia, the music stopping, had pushed their way back to the table while they were talking. "So'd you be, Irene, if you'd spent the last seven years in Abyssinia. Have another liqueur brandy, old Rip; and don't let the young woman vamp you."

"I'm not vamping him," declared Irene, the suspicion of a flush on her pale cheeks. "He's vamping me."

The verb "to vamp" was not in John Masterson's vocabulary; but its meaning seemed plain enough—and, for just the fraction of a second, the implication gave him pleasure. So this girl—this very young, very lovely girl—had not been entirely bored by his society!

The table re-crowding, however, she left him to his own devices; and, as soon as the music recommenced, went off with Ivor, protesting a trifle loudly, "You're a great dear, brother Ivor. But I never can dance with you, because you've got Tishy legs."

The word "Tishy" was also new to Masterson; and by the time that Mrs. Adrian, with whom he now found himself alone, had explained it, Irene and her brother were in full swing, talking together cheek-by-cheek as they danced.

"You'll have to learn these new steps," said Mrs. Adrian.

"Not I." Masterson's eyes were still with Irene. "I'm too clumsy."

"Well, you can't be as clumsy as Adrian. Socially, I mean." The little blonde woman with the tiny pale hands and the Cupid's bow of a mouth had taken one of her rare fancies to this big solemn friend of Adrian's school-days. "Wasn't he dreadful just now, Mr. Masterson? And the worst of it is, that he doesn't care. That's why he's so successful, I believe. Because he doesn't care what the public thinks about him. Tell me, was he always like that? When he was at Eton, for instance?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Were you very horrified at dinner?"

"Good Heavens, no." Masterson laughed. "To tell you the truth, I rather admired him. With a gift of the gab like that, he ought to be in Parliament."

"I know." Perceptibly the shy voice saddened.
"Doesn't he *want* to go into Parliament, then?"
"Of course he does. It's the dream of his life. But . . ."
"But what?"
"Oh, nothing. Haven't you been told?"
And Mrs. Rose, to Masterson's astonishment, put a hand on his arm, saying, "It's because of me that Adrian can't stand for Parliament. I thought you knew. I thought everybody knew. Don't ask me any more about it. Get Lord Rupert to tell you. Or, better still, Adrian himself."

§ 4

Masterson had not fully recovered from his astonishment when Irene, her face hardly flushed with the exercise, brought Ivor back to the table and protested for the second time, "He *has* got Tishy legs. I don't care what anyone says. You finish the dance with him, Mrs. Rose—and see if I'm not right."

He wanted, once they were alone, to ask the girl if she could throw any light on this mystery about Rose. But the question—said the unsophistication in him—was not one that should be put to her; and instead, he asked her what she and her brother had been talking about while they danced.

"You!" said Irene Carslake; and went on hurriedly: "I'm afraid you'll think it awful nerve, Mr. Masterson. But I, we, the whole family I mean, are frightfully bothered about Ivor. He's a dear boy, you know; and quite clever. But he simply *can't* find anything to do. So I—it really was *my* idea and not his—I said I'd ask whether you could help."

"But how can I help, Miss Carslake?" Once more, astonishment had Masterson in its grip. "Except for my accountant and my solicitor I hardly know a soul in London."

"Oh, but surely you could do *something* for him." Irene's glance was half childish, half womanly, and, to Masterson, all appeal. "I mean, when anybody's as rich as you are, he must have influence—shares in companies, and that sort of thing. And besides, don't you want a land-agent? Or a secretary? I'm sure Ivor'd make a splendid secretary."

"I'm sure he would." Masterson, not knowing what to say, tugged at his moustache. "But I—I don't happen to be in need of a secretary, Miss Carslake. Still"—caution vanished at a second glance from those appealing eyes—"I'll do what I can."

"Thanks awfully." The girl's soft lips parted in a relieved

smile. "That *is* a relief. I'll tell Ivor. But not till to-morrow. He can come and see you some day. You don't want to talk business to-night, *I'm* sure. And I say"—she was all the child again now—" you didn't mind my asking, did you? I wouldn't have done it for anyone else, but Ivor and I are such pals."

"Of course I didn't mind," said Masterson.

They sat on, not very talkative, each busy with thought; and gradually, as the dance-music and their resultant *tête-à-tête* continued, Masterson again fell prey to that sudden rush of strangely uncomfortable emotion. Again, he wanted to ask her about that chance meeting in Piccadilly. Again, his courage failed to put the question. "It doesn't matter," he thought. "Nothing matters."

For something in this girl, as in no other he had ever met, excited him, made him uncaring about anything except her immediate presence. Every now and then, involuntarily, he caught himself appraising some little physical perfection—the suppleness of her young wrists, the way the hair curled iridescent at her tiny ears, the clean chiselling of lip and nostril, the shimmer of skin at her shoulder, the bloom of skin at her cheek.

Yet such was the simplicity of the man, that he never realized the truth of his own mood, nor dreamed the sheer physical interest—which grew and grew on him till, by the time Adrian Rose and Jill Fernshaw drifted back to their table, it seemed almost a relief that he was no longer alone with her—to be the forerunner of a passion which should alter his whole life.

CHAPTER TEN

§ 1

THE mystery of sex, which is the mystery of love, which is the mystery of all mysteries that concern that most mysterious of all created things, the human animal, brooks no real explanation; and it must, therefore, suffice to state that, from the moment Irene Carslake danced off again, all the boredom which he had anticipat· for that particular evening came stealing over John Masterson· soul.

Already it was past eleven o'clock, and Ciro's crowding. Constantly, *maitres d'hôtel* with uplifted hands steered newcomers to their places. Constantly, from their dais, the drums beat and the saxophones blared. Constantly, on the dance-floor, feet slithered, and bangles clinked, and women smiled on their partners as the rhythm of the music caught them and made them its own.

But to John Masterson, alone first with one and then with another of the three women who were not Irene, even the music spoke no message. Gradually—still never suspecting the forces at work in him—he fell to hating this luxurious place, and the well-dressed folk who swarmed in it, and the glitter of its lights, and the glitter of its jewellery, and the pop of its champagne-corks and the blither of its rag-time. "Fish out of water," his thoughts kept on repeating. "Why did I ever come home? Why didn't I stay on in Abyssinia?"

Irene was dancing with Starleigh now—and somehow, the sight disturbed him. He wanted not to watch them, not to wait for that glimpse of her pale, pleasure-lit face, of her little white hand high on Starleigh's shoulder.

It came to him that she might be in love with Rupert Starleigh, that Rupert Starleigh with his gay, gray eyes, and his smooth pale hair, and the easy grace of his steps was a fitting mate for her. "And why not?" asked the common-sense in him. "Why shouldn't she be in love with the man?"

Commonsense found no answer to that question. Nevertheless, at the mere asking of it, depression took him by the throat. Would this dancing—this infernal, idiotic dancing—never come to an end ?

" I think," the rattle of Jill Fernshaw's voice broke in on Masterson's ruminations, " that it's about time we were all of us making a move. They'll be taking the drinks away before we know where we are ; and even if they don't—I never can remember which are extension nights and which aren't—there's nothing in the world so dull as stopping in one place from the time it opens till the time it closes. Personally—I don't know how you feel about it, Mr. Masterson—I'm for the Quadrant."

" Me, too." Starleigh, back from his dance, led Irene to the table. " That floor's like a bally Rugger scrum. What about bills, cars, and all that sort of thing ? "

He called for his bill, and while he was signing it the other two couples—Cynthia Trevor clinging to Rose's muscular arm, Ivor Carslake following Mrs. Adrian—rejoined the party.

" The Quadrant ? " queried Rose, with a glance at his Isobel, who returned it. " No. I don't think so. What about you, Masterson ? The Quadrant isn't much fun if one doesn't dance."

" But look here," Starleigh spoke, " old Rip can't go to bed yet. Can he, Irene ? "

Irene, however, lighting yet another cigarette, did not seem to hear ; and Rose, with a second glance at his Isobel, went on, " I can give you a lift, if you care for one. Or we can send my wife back in the car and walk a yard or two. The rain stopped about an hour ago. There's nothing like a walk to clear one's head after this sort of thing."

" Yes. I think I'd rather like a walk—if Starleigh'll excuse us. As you say, the—what do you call it ?—Quadrant won't be much fun for me. And besides, I've had a longish day."

Masterson, glad of the excuse to break away, and slightly intrigued by Rose's suggestion—a suggestion which seemed to emanate, though not too obviously, from his rather surprising conversation with Rose's wife—rose up from the sofa ; and as he did so, Irene, her cigarette-lighting finished, moved away to one of the adjoining tables. Following her with his eyes while he shook hands with the rest of them, he experienced a real twinge—conscious this time—of anger. " Dash it," ran his angry thought, " she might have waited till *I'd* said good night."

Meanwhile the Roses, their *adieux* over, were already on their way out ; and after a second's hesitation, not knowing what else to do, he walked the few yards to where Irene stood talking

with a very thin man in a smoking-jacket and a very fat woman in a tiara ; and said, holding out his hand, " Good night, Miss Carslake. I'm afraid I've got to be off."

" Oh, good night, Mr. Masterson. I'm so sorry you're not coming on with us," answered Irene—and then, the high conventional note changing almost to a whisper as she turned from the thin man and the fat woman to let her cool fingers lie lightly in his : " It's simply ripping of you about Ivor . . . and, by the way, you do look a *little* like a really-truly cave-man, even in evening-dress."

§ 2

By the time that John Masterson, never quick at repartee, had realized the precise import of those last words, Irene Carslake's cool fingers had withdrawn themselves and she was again talking, in the calmest of calm voices, to her thin friend and his fat companion.

" Yes. That was Rose. I think, don't you ? that ' Templeton's Wife ' is the only play in Town worth seeing," he heard her say, as he left her and began to puzzle his doubtful way across the crowded dance-floor to where, beyond the glass doors, the playwright was already being helped into his fur-lined overcoat.

" Isobel won't be a tick," said Rose, flinging down an ostentatious shilling on the cloak-room counter. " What about *your* car ? "

" I—I didn't keep mine."

" You're sure you don't mind a walk ? "

" No. Of course not. Of course not."

For just a few seconds while he, too, was getting his hat and coat, John Masterson's whole air seemed so peculiar that the other—his mind as always attuned to the keenest perception of his fellows—very nearly doubted his sobriety. " What's the matter with the man," thought that other. " It can't be drink. He was absolutely all right just now." And then—a little light coming to him : " No. It's not drink. But it may be a woman. Which one, I wonder. Cynthia—Irene—Jill ? "

Once he had donned his coat, however, John Masterson's habitual self-control re-asserted itself ; and presently Rose—drawing a portmanteau of a cigar-case from his pocket and lighting a large Havana—forgot the momentary suspicion.

Presently, Rose's Isobel materialized from the cloak-room ; and the two men, having seen her into the car, set out on foot for Carlton House Terrace.

"Funny thing, running up against you after all these years," commented Rose, as they turned right-handed out of the Club.

"Yes. Very funny."

Masterson, his mind still with Irene Carslake, only grunted the answer; and the other, sensing his need for silence, said nothing more till they were almost into Piccadilly. Then he slackened stride; and, slipping a muscular arm through his old school-friend's, began to talk politics.

"I went off the deep end to-night," he confided. "It always maddens me when I hear young fools like Ivor Carslake finding excuses for Socialism. By the way, you're not touched with it, are you?"

"No." Masterson, who had not yet quite recovered his powers of concentration, spoke slowly. "No. At least, I don't think so. One wants to help people, of course."

"Naturally. That's why one's got to fight the thing. You see"—Rose's voice was deliberate; and his stride matched his voice in deliberation—"Socialism, actually, is just bad economics, tinged with false sentiment and perverted psychology. Allow it to run its course in a so-called democratic State, and the end of that State is . . . fatty disease of the ambition. That's where—if we're not careful—the Americans will have us beat. They encourage the ambition of the individual. We pamper the idleness of the mob. But you can't help the mob by pampering them. You've got to ginger them up; make them ambitious. Do you follow me?"

"Only up to a point. Life isn't a dog-fight."

"Oh, isn't it?"

And Rose, the main purpose of his walk abruptly forgotten, re-plunged into oratory, declaiming, with all the volubility of the Oriental, that "equality was a myth and Utopia a delusion, and the right to live a mere party cry launched by people who got five thousand a year for crying it," all the way across Piccadilly Circus, while Masterson, half convinced and wholly uncomfortable (for the night was very still and Rose's tone loud enough to carry a whole street-length), listened without comment, till, halfway down Waterloo Place, an altogether different voice, low and angry and a trifle scornful, broke in upon his musing.

"You're a nice pair, aren't you?" said that altogether different voice. "Trying to barge a kid like me off the pavement."

"Sorry," muttered Rose, breaking loose from the middle of a perfervid parenthesis. "Sorry."

He made to pass on; but Masterson's arm restrained him.

"We didn't do it intentionally," said Masterson.

"Oh, didn't you?" The girl who had accosted them was young, and dark of hair and small of stature. She laughed as she spoke; and the laugh—somehow or other—reminded Masterson of Irene's.

"Didn't you?" she repeated, her face shewing blue-white and her lips brick-red under the harsh glare of the arc-lamps; and went on, glancing nervously over her shoulder at a constable on his beat across the road, "I say, you might take a kid out to supper. I could do with a whiskey-and-soda. Or even a glass of fizz. It's a rotten job walking the streets on a night like this. And the police are perfect swine to us girls nowadays. If *he*," with another glance at the constable, "caught on to what I was doing, he'd run me in. So help me Gawd, he would. And they call this a free country."

"Don't you worry about *that*," laughed Rose, opening his fur coat and feeling in his trouser pocket for some silver. "You're too young to bother your head with politics."

Masterson, however, drawing out his note-case, forestalled the lesser liberality. "Here," he said, after fumbling for his note. "Here. Take this."

"Gawd! But you aren't half a toff." The girl's white gloved fingers clutched at the flimsy paper; and for a moment she stared at Masterson as though she thought him demented. Then, before either man could say another word, she was away, almost running, for the Haymarket.

"How much did you give her?" asked Rose, as they walked on again into Pall Mall.

"Tenner," answered John Masterson.

"Why so much?"

"I—I'm damned if I know."

§ 3

The incident of the girl, trivial enough in itself, yet served a two-fold purpose—putting a complete stopper on Rose's politics, and setting the current of John Masterson's thoughts once again in the direction of Irene. He, Masterson, wanted suddenly to be alone; to reason with himself; to go over the sensations of the night; to understand them. But once arrived at his own doorway, the idea of loneliness seemed to lose its appeal.

"What about a last drink?" he asked.

"Rather," answered Rose; and added, a note almost of apology in his voice. "That is, if I'm not keeping you up."

The footman on duty had opened the door while they were talking; and a moment or so later the playwright found himself escorted, across the largest hall he had ever seen in a private house, into the big bronze-papered smoking-room, where the Martinet, according to his new custom, lay snoring between two saddle-bag armchairs before a blazing fire.

The dog woke as they entered; rose; stretched himself, and lay down again. The footman brought an extra glass; was told that he might go to bed; and retired with a grateful, "Thank you, sir."

"I wonder what that poor devil of a girl is doing now," said Masterson, pouring their whiskies.

"Drinking herself blind, probably." Rose, his cigar finished, flung it across Martinet's back into the fire; adding, as he lit another from his case, "Or trying to buy dope from the Chinks. You can't help 'em when they've gone as far down the hill as she had."

"I expect you're about right."

Nevertheless, as they seated themselves, the cynicism irritated Masterson. He could not help remembering that Rose was a Jew, a creature altogether unlike himself. "Damned unfair of me, of course," he thought; and then, remembering his conversation with Mrs. Adrian, "I wonder whether I ought to ask him what his wife was driving at?"

Meanwhile Rose, his cigar between his teeth, was also thinking of Isobel.

"I wonder if you've got a quarter of an hour to spare," he said at last. "If so, I'd like to tell you a little story."

"About yourself?"

"Yes. Mainly about myself." Rose was choosing each word with the greatest care. "I may as well be quite frank. Before I suggested walking home with you to-night, my—Isobel, I should say, told me you had asked her why I didn't stand for Parliament. Of course, we both thought you knew. If we hadn't, Isobel wouldn't have accepted Rupert's invitation to meet you. That's one of our rules. No social intercourse under false pretences! And, since it's been accidentally broken, the sooner you hear the truth the better."

"The truth?" So far, John Masterson had not been able to summon up much interest.

"Yes," said Rose, removing the cigar from between his teeth and sending the ash to the hearth with one characteristic flick of the middle finger. "The truth! The truth being that Isobel is no more my wife than you are."

Here, for a long half-minute, the playwright paused, his hard, purposeful eyes scrutinizing those of his one-time friend. " Rotten audience to-night," thought the playwright, with a little of that satire which make his comedies the success of their epoch. Then, still picking his words, he went on :

" It's not *my* fault that we're not properly married. I'd marry Isobel to-morrow if the Law would let me. But the Law " —a tiny note of passion crept into the deep voice—" the Law doesn't happen to be interested in public morality or people's happiness. It's only interested in its own letter, in its own code. Shall I go on ? "

" Yes. Of course." Masterson's answer was polite as Masterson's eyes ; betraying none of the thoughts, the quite unreasonably antagonistic thoughts, that were in him.

Rose, after another pause, went on thus :

" I said it wasn't my fault that Isobel and I are not properly married. That's not quite accurate. It *is* my fault—if you can blame a man for the folly of a boy. I married—legally—when I was a boy. We were in love with one another—as boys and girls understand love. *Her* people didn't approve of the match—why, I didn't find out till afterwards, when it was too late. But mine were dead—and they'd left me about eight hundred a year. So we ran away—to a Register office. And a week later, I found out everything.

" Everything." The tiny note of passion had left Rose's voice ; and his eyes, fixed on the fire, held tragedy. " The girl I'd married was a dope fiend. Morphia—cocaine—any drug she could get hold of. I—I won't give you any details. They're too revolting. The taint, I discovered, was hereditary, practically incurable. The doctors told me to send her into a home. But I—I was still too much in love with her, and too much of a softy, for that. So I began to fight. I nearly won, too. I could have won—at least I'm almost sure I could—if, if I'd been able to go on loving Lilian.

" You see "—Rose's look was still tragedy—" a boy, the kind of boy I was, doesn't really know anything about love. He's an animal—just a lustful animal. And the lustful animal I was couldn't go on wanting Lilian. Not after—not after five years of—of trying to keep her clean. Besides—I was starting to get known by then. I'd written my first play—I often wonder how. Got it produced, too. And that meant meeting other women—decent women—more or less decent anyway—who didn't steal the housekeeping money to buy morphia."

Here, for the third time, Rose paused in his narrative ; and

to Masterson, watching him closely, it seemed as though he were unwilling to go on. "Poor devil," thought Masterson. "No wonder he's changed."

But Rose's next words—words spoken in anger, his red lips curled back under the black moustache—destroyed sympathy, renewed antagonism.

"God knows I wasn't lucky with my second woman," said Rose. "Lilian had been bad enough. But Helen—we'll call her Helen, if you don't mind—was a perfect devil. Helen had a legal owner, you see. And kids. Two of the jolliest little kids you can imagine. That was why she wouldn't let me do the right thing—let Lilian divorce me for her. 'We'll wait,' she said, 'till Harold dies.' Harold hadn't been a husband to her for ten years. I had that excuse anyway. And then, then"—abruptly the anger went out of Rose's voice—"then, the week before War broke out, I met Isobel."

"Isobel!" So reverent was Rose's tone that involuntarily Masterson felt his antagonism waning. "You don't know what she means to me. You don't know how it galls me to realize that I can't marry her. All through the War—you may have heard that I didn't do so badly in the War—and ever since—I haven't done so badly since, in my work, I mean—we've been everything to one another. But the Law—the Law doesn't give a damn for *that*."

The voice petered out; and this time it seemed to Masterson that the story was at an end. Rose, apparently, had forgotten him. He sat listless, the cigar-stump loose between his fingers, his whole attitude that of one brooding over his fate. Then a coal dropped from the grate; Martinet yelped once in his sleep; and abruptly the man was himself again—forceful, purpose in his every gesture.

"That's for friendship," he said, replacing the coal. "I never could tell stories, except with actors and scenery. And this one's incomplete. You don't understand it, do you? You're wondering why I haven't got a divorce from my first wife?"

Masterson made no answer; and Rose, again choosing each word with the greatest care, finished his tale:

"I did get a divorce from her. Before—before Isobel came to live with me. It wasn't difficult either. Lilian, after I went away to the War, didn't take long to find somebody else. Only the decree was never made absolute. It couldn't be. Because of that second woman whom we'll go on calling Helen. I'd written her letters, you see—and when she found out about Isobel, she sent those letters to the King's Proctor; and he

intervened. My solicitors wanted me to fight—or at any rate throw myself on the mercy of the Court. I'd have done it, too. Except for Isobel. Isobel—bless her dear heart—wouldn't have it. She said she'd rather live with me in what she calls ' open sin '—she's rather religious, you know—than harm either of those two jolly kids. Funny—when you come to think of it—that she should consider those kids when their own mother would have sacrificed even them to get her revenge on me. But then—as I told you before—Helen always was a perfect devil. Can you, could I, could anybody in their senses imagine that a woman would send her lover's letters to the King's Proctor when her legal husband, the man she'd always been expecting to die of diabetes, had got perfectly well again, thanks to this new cure, insulin ? "

§ 4

Adrian—his tale finished—heaved himself up from the chair ; and watching him, there came to John Masterson—because between these two there yawned that deep gulf which separates, and will always separate, the soul of the Christian from the soul of the Jew—one instant of sheer indecision, during which all the Puritan in him revolted.

Then he, too, heaved himself upright ; and for an appreciable moment of time, almost as boxers in a ring, the pair confronted one another.

" I'm sorry for the woman," thought Masterson. " But I'm not sorry for him. Marriage is marriage. A chap can't get out of his responsibility towards his wife, just because he happens to fall out of love with her. And besides—he's a Jew. Jews aren't like us. They're Orientals. They've no respect for women."

So Masterson : while in Rose, too—as silence lengthened—the age-old antagonisms between their races began to work.

" These Christians," thought Rose. " Except for Isobel, they're all alike. What's this one going to do ? Pass judgment on me ? To hell with his judgment ! Ask questions ? To hell with his questions ! I won't answer them. Why should I ? I don't want anything from this man—even if he has got millions. I pay my own way in this world—just as I pay my own price, and God knows it's a heavy one, for happiness."

Nevertheless—primarily because, being a lover, he knew that happiness of his altogether linked with Isobel's, and secondly

because, being a Jew, all thought of failure seemed hateful to him —it was Adrian Rose who first broke the lengthening silence.

"May as well see where I stand," he said to himself; and aloud: "I'm afraid I've kept you up a deuce of a time, Masterson. Hope I haven't bored you too much with our troubles?"

"No." Masterson spoke slowly. "No. Of course you haven't bored me."

"You're a wee bit shocked, though?"

The question, uttered with the semblance of a smile, amounted to a direct statement; and for yet another appreciable moment of time, the candour in John Masterson fought vainly for self-expression.

"Do you want me to be quite frank?" he asked finally.

"Yes." Adrian Rose, that semblance of a smile still on his lips, never batted an eyelid. "Yes. Be quite frank. Only—before you say anything—please understand that, as far as I personally am concerned, it doesn't matter a tinker's curse whether you're shocked or not. My conscience is my own; and I ask no man to keep it for me. All I do ask—both from you and from the world in general—is a little sympathy and a little fairness for Isobel."

And on that, John Masterson—all the chivalry in him leaping to bridge the race-gulf between them—held out his hand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

§ 1

It is only in a perceived crisis that men of John Masterson's calibre take counsel with the night. Accordingly, on that eventful night which saw his first meeting with Irene Carslake, our particular John Masterson slept dreamlessly as was his habit, his windows wide to the London air and his old dog snoring peacefully at the foot of his bed.

Morning, however, once Menelik had brought his tea and the Martinet taken tail-wagging departure, brought a plenitude of recollections.

The memory of the girl, and more especially of those last words she had spoken, was strangely thrilling. And by the time he had finished his dressing and let himself down to breakfast, he knew—though his essential simplicity never let him suspect, not for a single moment, that he was already half in love—that he wanted to meet her again, and quickly; that, by hook or by crook, he must contrive to find a job for her brother. He even got as far as mentioning that last matter when, breakfast over, he went to pay his usual respects to Euphemia.

The old lady, however, already at her eternal crocheting, was also at her crochetiest.

"I don't see what you can do for the young man," she said irritably. "*You* don't want a secretary. Or a land-agent. What you want is a thoroughly reliable housekeeper. You can't expect *me* to last for ever, you know. And besides—though, mind you, I'm not grumbling—I never was a grumbler—I ought to have an occasional holiday."

"There's Mrs. Simcox," began Masterson, who had by now discovered that his aunt's housewifely responsibilities were strictly limited to a monthly grouse at the expenditure.

"Mrs. Simcox, indeed!" Euphemia bridled. "And, pray, where do you think Mrs. Simcox would be without *me*?"

"Well, we might have Mrs. Arbuthnot up from Mastersleigh."

"We might." Euphemia performed another bridle. "But we won't. I never *could* bear that woman. Like all the lower orders, she has ideas above her station. No, John. What *you* want"—firmly Euphemia felt for the *Morning Times*, and, having recovered it from that position where she inevitably kept her newspapers, uncreased it for inspection—"is a thoroughly capable woman—not too young, and of course a lady—to write your letters, and generally take the burden of running this establishment, *and* Mastersleigh, not only off your shoulders but"—with emphasis—"off mine."

Masterson, his mind elsewhere, did his best to beg the question; but his aunt continued to harp on it; and was still twanging away in her most aggressive manner when Pettery came in to announce, "Mr. Ellison's compliments, sir. And there's a gentleman named Carfax wishing to see you upstairs."

"Confounded nuisance, this establishment of mine," he thought, as he left her.

§ 2

The nuisances of Carlton House Terrace, however, were as nothing compared to the nuisances which his bull-dog-faced, stubby-fingered accountant, whom he found in spectacled contemplation of the over-night telephone messages which still littered the desk, laid before John Masterson the moment he entered his sanctum.

"Before we go into the question of these different bank balances," began Carfax, placing his bowlerhat carefully on the top of the safe between the two velvet-curtained windows and his stick behind the red baize door opposite the fireplace, "I must say I'd like to talk to you about something else—bookkeeping. *I* can't be responsible for your income-tax returns and your super-tax returns and all the other returns you'll have to make, if I don't even know which dividends are tax-free and which aren't. Besides, when a man's gross income is somewhere in the neighbourhood of five hundred pounds a day——"

"But it can't be as much as that," protested Masterson. "Not with taxes at eleven-and-six in the pound."

"I said *gross*," went on Carfax, "not nett"; and added, seating himself, "Take it from me, if you want things done properly you'll have to have a competent typist and a competent clerk."

This question also, secretly groaning at the additional complications that every hour seemed to be thrusting on him, Masterson managed to beg; and for a while Carfax let it alone, discussing the ostensible purport of his appointment, "these balances." Then the telephone bell, mysteriously connected with Mr. Parker's pantry in the basement, began ringing, and continued to shrill at intervals all the while their intricate discussion proceeded.

"Damn the beastly thing," grumbled Masterson, after the fifth or sixth interruption. "That was one of the Sunday papers, asking permission to photograph the house."

"But why don't your servants deal with that sort of call?" asked Carfax, somewhat amused at the gruff way in which his client had handled the *Weekly Pictorial.*

"They can't. They're all deaf."

"Then why don't you keep a secretary?"

"I'm considering that," said Masterson.

For somehow, ever since entering his sanctum, he had not been able to keep himself from thinking of that promise to Irene Carslake; and gradually, as the long interview with Carfax, always interrupted by the infernal telephone, wore to its close, the vague idea of having a secretary, of having somebody, anybody, to assist him with the manifold detail-work of his estate, became the clear-cut certainty that the particular somebody ought to be Ivor.

"She'd never forgive me if, having said I didn't want a secretary, I took somebody else," ran his thoughts, as he watched the accountant at last gather up his various documents and prepare for departure.

§ 3

Psychology, unlike accountancy, not being an exact science, it seems difficult to state the precise reason why—once Carfax had left him—John Masterson's thoughts, instead of continuing with Ivor Carslake, reverted to Mary Millward.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that they did so; and for a whole ten minutes after the red baize door closed behind the accountant's back, he wandered up and down the sanctum, his hands deep in his trouser pockets, his pipe puffing like a factory chimney, and his entire attitude that of a man in difficulty suddenly struck with a very remarkable solution of his problems.

But those ten minutes over—again one stresses the fact that psychology is not an exact science—the idea of asking Mary Mill-

ward to become his secretary began to seem rather futile. To begin with, Mary had made up her mind not to leave Lipstone. And item—very much item—what about his promise to Irene Carslake ?

" I'd better wait," he decided, still with no more realization than the man in the moon of the forces at work in him, " I'd better wait till I've had a talk with that brother of hers."

In that mood he glanced at his watch, saw it was already half-past eleven, and decided on a walk ; telling Parker, who let him out with the usual ceremony, " If I'm not back by half-past one, don't keep luncheon waiting for me."

Walking—it was a cold blue London day with a bite of frost in the air—seemed to ease his mind. The matters of the housekeeper, of the ledger clerk, of the typist, and even of the secretary, could wait. For the moment, he needed exercise !

That exercise took him down Waterloo Steps, along Constitution Hill, past Buckingham Palace, out into Piccadilly at Hyde Park Corner, and thence, still unthinking, along the outside of the Park railings, till, crossing over, he found himself opposite one of the few places in London he really knew, Tattersalls.

" May as well see what's going on," he thought, and wandered idly in.

A catalogue, obtained from the little office just beyond the gateway, told him that a hunter-sale was in progress ; and wandering on, idly as he had wandered in, he soon found himself under the high roof of the big dark-gray quadrangular mart which is the centre of London's horse-dealing.

Good hunters, apparently, had increased their value since the War. As he joined the little crowd of hunting-men, grooms and dealers near the rostrum, the auctioneer's hammer fell on a bid of three hundred guineas.

Soon, however, prices began to sag. The next horse, " property of a gentleman," fetched its hundred-and-fifty ; the next only a hundred ; the third a mere seventy.

" Cheap 'un, that," decided John Masterson ; and presently another " cheap 'un "—a black, seventeen hands if an inch, " who had carried the huntsman " with a well-known pack in Leicestershire—caught his fancy.

Bidding for this black—who had entered gingerly, and was now shewing the whites of his eyes to the crowd—seemed of the weakest. One of the dealers offered a tentative " tenner " ; a soldierly-looking man in a rhubarb-coloured coat, who sported a flat-brimmed bowler, made it fifteen ; another dealer ventured

twenty; a bewhiskered old codger nodded it to twenty-five. The soldierly-looking one bid, "Thirty," in a crisp, pleasant voice.

"Come, gentlemen," encouraged the auctioneer. "He's worth more than that."

"Not he," remarked the old codger, as the helper trotted Peter the Great once up and down the flags; and the big horse, lashing out, made the crowd belly, as a blown sail bellies, from the line.

"Call it thirty-two," said the second dealer.

"Thirty-five, I'm bid," announced the auctioneer looking to the man in the rhubarb-coloured coat. "Thirty-five guineas only for Peter the Great—one of the best horses that ever went across a country. Look at him, gentlemen. Look at him."

So John Masterson looked; and looking, felt all his father's love for a bargain surge hot to his brain. He realized that he didn't need the horse; that to buy it would be merest whim. Nevertheless, he made his bid, "Forty."

"Forty-five," said the crisp pleasant voice of the soldierly one. "Fifty," nodded the first of the dealers. "Fifty-five," nodded the second dealer. "Sixty," decided that crisp, pleasant voice.

And, "Hang it all," thought John Masterson, "am I going to be beaten?"

All the same he hesitated—hesitated while the price rose from sixty to a hundred. After all—even though the horse was guaranteed sound, and up to any weight—even though it must be worth, at the lowest, its couple of hundred—he, John Masterson, did *not* need it.

"A hundred-and-five," called the auctioneer, "who'll make it a hundred-and-ten?"

And on that—abruptly mindful of his millions—Masterson determined to own Peter the Great. "A hundred-and-ten," he bid. "A hundred-and-fifteen," bid the crisp voice from under the flat-brimmed bowler. "Twenty," nodded the first dealer. "Twenty-five," nodded the third. "One hundred-and-thirty," nodded Masterson, his gall rising a little as he caught the auctioneer's eye.

At a hundred-and-forty, the first dealer—his commission exhausted—shut up shop; at a hundred-and-fifty, the second, remarking in an audible voice that, "the two toffs had gone barmy," followed suit. But the man in the rhubarb-coloured coat stuck to it, never batting an eyelash and calling each bid, till the price touched one hundred-and-eighty guineas. On

which Masterson, who had been listening intently, realized, from an undertone in the voice, that he was beginning to waver. "Got him!" he thought, forgetful of everything except the fight —and nodded again.

"Against you, sir," said the auctioneer; but, though he repeated himself, the soldierly one stood dumb; and watching him, John Masterson saw that he was biting hard on his lower lip. Then he turned away and the hammer fell with the sharp rap of finality.

CHAPTER TWELVE

§ 1

JOHN MASTERSON, a little surprised at himself, and still more surprised because the auctioneer, once he knew his name, had told his clerk, " Oh, that's all right, Jim. Mr. Masterson can send us his cheque in the morning," followed Peter the Great out of the mart and back to his stable.

" You haven't gone far wrong with this one, sir," commented the groom in charge.

And indeed the horse, now carefully inspected, proved even better than Masterson's snap judgment had anticipated ; so that, just for a moment, as he contemplated his new purchase, he experienced the full pleasure of possession.

That pleasure, however—Peter the Great double-rugged and his groom tipped—did not endure. " Money's the devil," he thought, remembering the last look, a look half angry and half sorrowful, which his opponent had flung him as he turned away. " Money's the very devil. It wasn't a fair fight. That fellow went to his limit ; and I—I haven't got a limit."

The thought developed as he made his way to the office and arranged for Peter the Great to be sent to Mastersleigh. He reminded himself that he hadn't really needed the horse, that he had only bid for it, out of that bottomless purse of his, for the sheer fun of the bidding ; and, doing so, began to feel as depressed as a decent man might feel after losing his temper and over-beating a street-urchin with a heavy walking-stick.

Thinking thus, still idle but with no wish to go back to the sale, Masterson started an aimless inspection of the various stalls : till, presently, his mind reverted to the problems which had been obsessing it just before he left Carlton House Terrace. " Now what about young Carslake ? " he asked himself—and so asking perceived, not without astonishment, Irene.

Irene—impossible to mistake because she happened to be

wearing the same hat and the same coat of dark brown fur in which he had first encountered her—was standing some way away from him at the very end of the long stable he had just entered. As he approached, she disappeared into one of the stalls; and as he rounded the partition of that stall, he saw her bend down to feed a lump of sugar to the tiny Shetland pony who inhabited it.

Absorbed in this task, she appeared not to notice him; and just for a heart-beat or so (they were rather quick heart-beats for John Masterson) he had the opportunity of appreciating the grace of her bent shoulders, of her bent body, of the tapered ankles under the hem of her fur.

Then she looked up; and said, betraying none of the excitement she had felt at seeing him enter the stable. "So it's you, is it, Mr. Masterson? I wondered who was staring at me. And what are you doing at Tats? Buying gee-gees?"

"Well, I have bought one," admitted Masterson.

"What kind of a one?"

"Oh, not bad."

He began telling her about Peter the Great while she, continuing to feed sugar to the pony, watched him with appraising eyes. "I *do* like him," she thought. "I like him awfully. I wish I weren't going away . . ."

"And you?" he asked. "What are *you* doing here? Is that funny little beggar yours?"

"No. Father's. He breeds them. But he always expects me to attend the sales."

"Really."

Irene, veiling her eyes, and her thoughts with them, began to talk Shetlands; and as she did so all the over-night incidents went flashing across the screens of John Masterson's brain. "Funny creatures, girls," ran his slow thoughts. "I wonder why she thinks I look like a cave-man." And the thought made him suddenly shy of her, suddenly awkward. "Really," he kept commenting. "Really."

Meanwhile, Irene, too, felt herself growing shy, almost tongue-tied in her shyness. "What's the matter with you?" ran *her* thoughts. "What on earth's the matter with you, Irene Carslake? You're not nervous. You can't possibly be nervous just because you're talking to this absurd man."

All the same, though her tongue continued to find words, she knew that she *was* nervous, quite ridiculously nervous—and quite ridiculously glad of the support (the nice, warm, tangible support) which the pony's shaggy head gave to her ungloved hand. "But it's only because he will go on saying, 'Really,'"

she decided. "Only because I know I'm going to laugh if he says it again."

He did say it again; and she did laugh. But her nervousness kept on increasing, so that she had to hide it with a stream of prattle.

"Isn't it rotten," she prattled. "They're not selling the ponies till ever so late. So I'll have to come back after lunch, because Father will never forgive me if I don't write and tell him *everything* about the sale. He never puts on a reserve. How can he, when the railway rates are so awful, and he has to send them all the way up from Lostwithiel. Oh—and did I tell you last night that we're off to the South of France—that is, Cynthia and I are, the day after to-morrow?"

"No," said John Masterson; and he spoke, for no reason that he could then think of, a great deal quicker than his wont. "No. You never told me that."

"Aren't you sorry? I am. I mean, I don't really want to go."

"But why not?" asked John Masterson; and at that, abruptly as it had come upon her, Irene's nervousness vanished. After all, he *was* an absurd person. Slow in the uptake, too. Why, he didn't even know when one was giving him a lead!

She had the impulse to give him another lead. She even had the impulse to be rude to him—just "for fun," just to see how he would take it. But a queer, uncanny certainty that she had already accomplished some hidden purpose, restrained both impulses; and conquering them, she said, "I don't quite know *why* I don't want to go. I just don't."

"You'll enjoy it all right when you get there," suggested Masterson, wondering vaguely, as he spoke the words, why the thought of her leaving London should bring depression.

"Probably," she admitted; and after that, while the pony, eager for more, teased at her denying hand, conversation languished; till Masterson, searching for any means to revive it, asked her where she was lunching.

"But it can't be lunch-time yet?" she said.

"It is. It's one o'clock."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, quite."

"Then I must have got up horribly late. Mustn't I, Toto?"

Irene, her pale hands tugging at Toto's black mane, seemed to be considering some abstruse point; and, watching her, Masterson was again aware of the overnight emotion.

"What's she thinking about?" he speculated; and was still

so speculating when she said, hardly knowing why she said it, yet still acutely conscious of that queer, uncanny certainty that some hidden purpose was accomplishing itself between them :

" If it's really as late as you say, Mr. Masterson, and if you've got nothing better to do, I don't see why *you* shouldn't have the exceedingly onerous duty of taking me to lunch."

§ 2

There are many worse sensations, even for a jaded multi-millionaire, than that of conducting the prettiest girl he knows to an unexpected *tête-à-tête* luncheon ; and our friend, Masterson, being by no manner of means jaded, was conscious, as he led Irene away from the wise-eyed Toto into open air, that life had become very much worth his while.

Also—once he had recovered from his tiny amazement at her suggestion—he was distinctly conscious of pride.

" Where do you suggest we lunch ? " he asked, hailing an opportune taxi at the corner of Sloane Street.

" The Berkeley," commanded Irene, one suède-shod foot on the running-board. " I simply adore the Berkeley : because it's so horribly expensive, and because, whenever I go there, I always meet everybody I know."

" Right you are," said Masterson, handing her in.

The soft cling of her furs against his ungloved fingers roused all the protective instinct in him. Watching her while she seated herself, daintily, on the leather cushions ; giving the driver his order ; seating himself beside her, he had a sudden sense of self-importance. And that sense of self-importance—not unmingled with admiration, an admiration more poetic than physical, of her fresh youth, and her dewy charm, and her general adorable-ness—endured all the short way down Piccadilly till their taxi drew up, at precisely seven minutes past one by the clock above the portico, opposite the glass doors of the restaurant she had chosen.

In the little French hall of that restaurant, the three bandsmen were just on their dais ; and from its interior there emerged, synchronizing their entrance with that bland smile which your Italian reserves for frequent customers, a very polite *maître d'hôtel* who proceeded to find " Mademoiselle Carslake " a cocktail-table.

" You sit here and keep it," ordered Irene to Masterson. " I'm going to powder my nose. Tell him to bring two Martinis with a dash of absinthe, and to be quite sure that we have one of

the very best tables—I like it to be well away from the music—for lunch."

The little air of mischievous command she had assumed ever since leaving Tattersalls tickled Masterson's sense of humour; and after he had carried out her orders and handed his hat and coat to the page-boy, he fell to chuckling over it "She's really only a baby," he thought, quite unmindful of that thought's precise significance—and so thinking looked up to see Adrian Rose, a trifle flamboyant in a light gray morning suit, just about to enter the hall.

"Morning," said Rose, coming straight across to him. "Are you alone?"

"Good morning," countered Masterson. "No. I'm not alone. I'm lunching with Miss Carslake—or rather, Miss Carslake is lunching with me."

"So I wasn't so far wrong about him last night," thought Rose. "This promises to be rather amusing."

But aloud he confined himself to saying, "Well, give her my love—she's a dear kid, is our Irene"; and almost immediately swung off, with that curiously self-confident gait of his, to the sofa under the window; where Masterson, following him with his eyes, saw him shake the hands of three people—a nondescript goggle-eyed man with a black walrus moustache, a clean-shaven dapper-looking boy, and a tubby young woman, red of hair and loud of laugh, who looked like a very naughty housemaid, but happened to be quite a moderately good actress.

"That's Peggy Brown," explained Irene, rejoining him at the table.

"And who's Peggy Brown?" asked Masterson, noticing how childishly slim his companion looked without her furs.

"She's the wife—Templeton's wife—in Adrian's play."

"Really."

"I wish you wouldn't always say 'really,'" laughed Irene.

"Sorry," said Masterson. "It's a habit. Tell me about Peggy Brown."

The arrival of cocktails momentarily interrupted their conversation. Then Irene, lifting her glass to her lips and smiling right across the now-crowded hall at Adrian and his party, went on: "Peggy's rather a dear in her way. Though she does dress like a golliwog. She came on to the Quadrant last night. It was rather a scream, as a matter of fact, because Rupert used to be in love with her before . . ."

"Before what?"

But Irene, blushing ever so faintly, checked there.

Presently, the faint blush, unperceived by Masterson, paled. Presently, resuming conversation, she steered deftly away from danger. Nevertheless, the recollection of Rupert's kisses, of Rupert's gray eyes flaming to passion under their thick quivering lashes, became—for the first time—strangely troublesome; and suddenly she knew—with a sharp pang of conscience—that she would give a good deal for those particular kisses never to have occurred.

"Playing with fire," said conscience. "You're not in love with Rupert. If you were, you wouldn't be able to keep your head."

Still, she *had* kept her head, far more than Rupert Starleigh; and by the time they finished their cocktails, and made their way into the dining-room, the little mood of guilty introspection had almost disappeared.

"Of course," she announced, having insisted on ordering their meal, "I had no right to tell you what you ought to have. Any more than I had any right to ask myself to lunch with you. Tell me—did you think it awful cheek?"

Masterson hedged; and she went on, mischievous again: "I *am* cheeky, aren't I? Do you remember what I said to you last night?"

"About your brother?" asked Masterson, still hedging.

"No. Right at the end. Just when you were going away."

"Yes." Their eyes met across the table. "Yes. I remember."

"And did you know what I was referring to?"

"I did," said Masterson bluntly; and once more their eyes met.

"I expect that was really why I suggested the Berkeley," went on Irene, "because it was so close to where I first saw you." And after she had added, brightly inconsequent, "Though it might just as well have been the Ritz, mightn't it?" silence—a silence full of many possibilities—fell softly between them.

Their meal went on; but, though they ate, their minds were not with the meal, nor with the little well-dressed horde of their fellow-lunchers. Their minds were wandering, wandering in strange places.

"It's the music," thought Irene. "It's that funny tune they're playing outside." And, "I wonder *what* it is," thought Masterson. "I wonder what's making me so curiously happy."

At last, self-consciousness came to him—came to them both. But the silence seemed to have established an intimacy; and

presently Masterson found himself talking to this girl, whom he had not yet known for a whole twenty-four hours, almost as directly as he would have talked to a man.

"About that brother of yours, Miss Carslake," he began. "Apparently, if I do take a secretary—and from what I can see I shall simply have to get somebody to help me look after things—he, or she, will have to know quite a lot. Book-keeping, for instance. And type-writing."

Masterson went on talking; and Irene, her sea-green eyes once more appraising, heard him out. Truth to tell, she had rather forgotten about Ivor.

Gradually, however, seeing that the seed planted on a momentary impulse had borne such prompt fruit, her interest in it requickened; and she became aware—rather pleasantly—of power. "He doesn't really want to take Ivor," she thought. "But he will—if I ask him nicely enough."

"I quite see about the accounts and the typing," she said, at a pause in Masterson's monologue; and as she said it one of her little white hands made the tiniest of tiny movements across the table-cloth. "But even if Ivor couldn't do everything you want at once, he could soon learn. Ivor's frightfully clever. He'd have taken a Double First if he hadn't been so keen on his cricket. And he really does understand horses."

"That'd be a help, of course," said Masterson—thinking considerably less of Ivor's suitability than of that little white hand which, having made its one impulsive movement towards him, now retired slowly back across the table-cloth, and came to rest on Irene's lap.

All the same, Irene, now all on fire with the idea of getting her own young way, had not yet accomplished it when Rose, who had been an interested spectator of their *tête-à-tête*, got up from his own table and came easily across the emptying restaurant to theirs.

"Hallo, Irene," interrupted Rose. "You're a nice young night-hawk! I've been hearing all about you from Peggy. Four o'clock, wasn't it, before you left the Quadrant?"

"Four-thirty, to be exact, Adrian."

"Scandalous," laughed Rose; and went on, not without a touch of malice. "And what are you two talking about—yourselves?"

"No. I may tell him, mayn't I?" Irene's eyes shot a questioning glance across the table. "It's about brother Ivor. Mr. Masterson thinks he might take him as a kind of secretary. Isn't it a perfectly topping idea?"

"It's undoubtedly an idea." The playwright, seeking a cue, looked at the millionaire.

"Rather a good one, don't you think?" The millionaire, seeking a certainty, looked at the playwright.

"You might do worse," The playwright, still seeking his cue, looked at Irene—and got it. "You might do very much worse. After all, you *must* have a gentleman for a job like yours."

Then, mindful of the reason which had brought him to their table—for no act of Adrian Rose's, not even his little walk across the Berkeley, was ever devoid of some purpose—he changed the conversation with a deliberate: "Look here, what I came over about was this. Jinkson—he's the chap I'm lunching with, the one who looks like a sea-lion—has got one seat left for to-night's fight at the Albert Hall—Bob Brackley and Patsy Kynes. I was wondering if you'd care to come. As my guest, of course. I'm giving a stag-dinner before it starts. Seven sharp, at the Oak Tree Club. And I'd like you to come to that, too. Starleigh'll be there, and one or two other O.E.'s you may remember."

"Thanks," began Masterson; but before he could finish the sentence, Irene broke in.

"Adrian," broke in Irene, a curious sparkle in her eyes, "I'd adore to see a real fight. Be an angel. Get me a seat, too. I'll pay you for it when Dad sends my next quarter's allowance."

And Adrian Rose, to Masterson's amazement, accepted the suggestion, saying, as he started back for his own table, "All right. Just half a tick, till I see whether old Jinks can manage it."

§ 3

Adrian Rose's talk with "old Jinks" lasted a good three minutes, and all through those three minutes amazement grew on John Masterson. That any girl—and above all others this girl—should desire to witness a prize fight, shocked the Victorian in him to the marrow bones.

"I shall be *sick* if Adrian *can't* manage it," she told him; and when Rose, those three minutes over, came back to say, "Can do," her gratitude was breathless, almost feverish in its excitement.

"What's the matter?" she asked, after he, too, had accepted, and Rose, having arranged the staff-work of fetching her from Sloane Street, had gone back to his guests. "You look as though you don't approve."

"I don't." Masterson's speech was at its bluntest.

"Why not? Cynthie's been to one."

"Your sister's a married woman."

"Aren't you absurd?" Irene laughed—and there was a tang of malice in the laughter. "Do you know, I think you're the oldest-fashioned person I've ever met."

"I'm sorry you think I'm old-fashioned, Miss Carslake." Masterson, more hurt than he knew, did not laugh in reply. "But——"

"I'm sorry, too." Subconsciously, her womanhood perceived the hurt in him. "Sorry you don't approve, I mean. Only"—consciously her girlhood seized on its one point of vantage—"I've got to go now, haven't I? I can't back out and let Adrian think I'm funking it. Cynthie says there's no *blood*. I *am* frightened of blood, you know. At least I always used to be when I was a kiddie. Cynthie says it's a complex . . ."

She rattled on again; and as he listened to her, it seemed to John Masterson that he had been altogether unreasonable.

"Why shouldn't she go to a fight if she wants to?" said the weakness—the sex-weakness—in him. "Just for once. It's rather plucky of her really, not trying to back out."

And so, at her very first real encounter with this man, it came about that Irene Carslake won two victories—his admission, given grudgingly, in answer to a direct question, that he "wouldn't think any the worse of her" for going to the fight; and his promise, given of his own accord, to take Ivor "for a month's trial" as his secretary.

Neither of which victories, however—though she thought about them all the while she waited for the auctioneer to sell Toto—seemed to compensate for a perfectly unreasonable fit of "the blues" that began to haunt her the moment she parted from Masterson outside the Berkeley, and reached its climax when, returned to Sloane Street, she found Cynthia's maid busy packing one of her trunks for the South of France.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

§ 1

THE mind of your average man, unlike the mind of your average woman, throws off its sex-preoccupations among the society of its fellows; and John Masterson, puffing at his cigar as Adrian Rose's stag-dinner of twelve drew to its close, hardly gave a thought to Irene Carslake.

His meal had been just to his taste, his wine iced to perfection; and now talk—easy, comprehensible man-talk—flickered pleasantly all round the hospitable table. "Nanny Goat" Freeman, a re-found friend, told a chestnut about a French master lecturing a class of young ladies on the first chapter of Genesis. Sitwell, another old Etonian, capped it. A huge florid fellow, whose name he had not caught, capped both—and set the whole dozen of them in roars of laughter—with a Rabelaisian yarn which concerned a Canadian cow-puncher. After which, conversation switched to the main event of the evening.

"Bob Brackley hasn't got an earthly," opined Starleigh. "I'll lay anyone even money he doesn't last two rounds; and six to one he's knocked out before the tenth."

"Done with you, Rupert," snapped Rose. "Done in fivers if you like. Bob Brackley's a skunk, all right. He'd book his passage to Timbuctoo if he thought Dempsey or Firpo were evén contemplating a trip to London. But he can knock the stuffing out of Patsy Kynes."

"I doubt it," countered Starleigh. "I doubt it to the extent of thirty quid. Anyone else care for a wager?"

No one else, however, did; and presently, after a little man with the face of twenty, the eyes of forty, and the most prominent pair of shirt studs Masterson had ever seen, had announced that "Bob Brackley was like most British heavyweights—all puff and no punch," Adrian Rose gave the signal to move off.

"I'll take Masterson and Starleigh in my car," said Rose,

as the Oak Tree page-boys helped his guests into their coats. "We've got to pick up a lady in Sloane Street."

"Can't you pick up one for each of us?" suggested the florid one, amid more laughter, as the three made their exit.

§ 2

Once into his car, Rose, who had that genuine love of the ring which is inherent in a certain type of Jew, and Starleigh, who could talk on almost any subject under the sun, began an argument about "the game."

"Personally," pronounced Starleigh, "I believe that Pat Kynes has the makings of a world-champion in him."

"Personally," retorted Rose, "I don't believe we'll ever make a world-champion in England till we give up handing big purses to second-raters. Tony was quite right about the all puff and no punch business. You can't expect to breed fighters in a country where you call a man a champion the moment he's beaten a couple of stiffs at The Ring and stood up for a round and a half to Carpentier."

To which profound, if bitter, truth, Starleigh did his best to find an answer; while John Masterson, his subconscious sex-preoccupations returning, began to think about Irene; and continued thinking about her, confusedly, till the Rolls made Cynthia Trevor's yellow-varnished front-door in aristocratic Sloane Street; and out of it, a quaint little figure, her loose purple opera cloak bunched about her hips and a huge pair of opera-glasses clutched in both hands, stepped the girl herself.

"Not late, am I?" she asked, a trifle breathlessly, as Rose handed her into the limousine and seated her beside him. "Good evening, Mr. Masterson. Good evening—Rupert."

Her "Good evening—Rupert" sounded a trifle hesitant; and, as the big car glided off, its owner, with that uncanny perspicacity which distinguished him from his fellows, became conscious of drama. "Starleigh's out of favour to-night," thought that owner. "I wonder why."

And Adrian Rose's wonder grew on him with their gliding progress. None of his three guests—though he did his utmost to make them talk—seemed in any way responsive. Even Starleigh's usual bonhommie had deserted him. Back to the engine, he sat glum, looking now at the girl, now at Masterson, who, at the girl's other side, only grunted "Yes," or "No," when one spoke to him. While as for Irene herself, Rose—watching her

sideways—could see that the oval of her face was whiter than he had ever known it, and that her lips were trembling.

" It can't be only the fight," he decided when—five hundred yards from the Albert Hall with a queue of cars blocking them—he stooped down, according to habit, to switch on the roof-light, and she said, speaking almost shrewishly, " Don't ! Don't do that, Adrian. You know how I hate a glare."

All the same, just for once, as it made that last decision, Rose's perspicacity over-reached itself. Stepping into the car, Irene *had* experienced another involuntary stab of conscience. Now, however, excitement—the sheerest, least comprehensible physical excitement—represented all her mood. Momentarily, she had forgotten everything—even her peculiar relations with Rupert Starleigh—in anticipation of the fact that she was about to witness a " prize fight." " I've got to be calm," she kept telling herself. " I've simply *got* to be calm."

And once Rose's car had come to a standstill under the portico, once he had handed her out, she *was* calm—with that funny frozen calmness she had known once before, six months ago now, when her hired hack had bolted with her in the Row.

" Are they actually fighting ? " she asked, as the four of them passed from the cold of the night into the warmth of the hall.

" Only one of the preliminary bouts," explained Rose, adding, half in jest and half to see how she would take it, " Don't forget to hold Rupert's hand if there's a knock-out. It's always done, I'm told."

§ 3

Certain remarks, casual enough in utterance, are apt to be dynamic in reaction ; and that last remark of Adrian Rose's, who now led his companions straight through the double doors to their seats, produced, in all three of them, its specific—one might almost write its prophetic—effect.

To take Masterson first. In him, the remark aroused feelings which, though not exactly jealousy, amounted almost to that particular emotion. Unconsciously resenting the mere suggestion of any familiarity between this radiant, rose-leaf girl and Rupert Starleigh, he fell to telling himself—as he followed on down the gangways—that such scenes as this one should be only for men, and not—not in any circumstances whatever—for women, who ought to be secluded, in the safest of domestic seclusions, from all that was gross and crude and vulgar in the life of the mob. While as for Irene, she, though still under the spell of her

funny frozen calmness, could not avoid a sudden apprehension lest Rose, with that almost feminine intuition of his, should have discovered the truth.

Irene's reaction, however, as Masterson's, lasted only for the minute or so during which they made their way to the centre of the hall. Whereas Rupert Starleigh's endured till the big fight began.

For in Rupert Starleigh, Englishman though he was, there existed a queer un-English strain—derived, may be, from some long-dead Norman ancestor ; and in him those few words, spoken at random, served to kindle a whole fire of dangerous thought.

" You want this girl," thought Rupert Starleigh, " you want all of her. She's played the *demi-vierge* with you too long' and he remembered—as Rose shepherded them round the ringside to their places—with a pleasure whose acuteness made it very kin to pain, those many hectic moments when, pressing his mouth to hers, he had so nearly savoured the whole core of that sweet fruit which her youth, questing for experience, had dangled before his virile maturity.

But to-night—his twentieth-century sophistication realized —Irene's youth was questing a different experience. Already, handing her to her place behind Rose and Masterson, seating himself beside her, he could see—and resent—that the last round of the last preliminary bout had absorbed her every capacity for emotion.

Half in and half out of her purple cloak, she sat tense, her eyes only for the ring, her little hands clenching nervously on the big, useless opera-glasses every time some innocuous blow landed with the slap of leather against flesh, her ankle-muscles taut under their silk, and her nostrils twitching, almost as the nostrils of a horse twitch when it first smells hounds in the hunting-field.

Yet even the twentieth-century sophistication in Rupert Starleigh failed to realize the full effect of that preliminary but on the girl who had so nearly yielded herself tohim.

When that bout ended with a decision on points, Irene could feel her very knees tremble with anticipation of the greater fight to come. When the two men, having shaken hands with one another and re-donned their dressing-gowns, climbed out through the ropes, her eyes, following them, positively smarted under their twitching lids. And when they disappeared among the crowding gangways, she was conscious—vividly and acutely and painfully conscious—that she had not wanted them to leave the ring, that she had wanted them to go on fighting till one of them had his way with the other.

For in Irene, too, there existed a queer un-English strain—derived, may be, from some Roman woman who had watched real gladiators battle to their long-ago death in the roaring, blood-reeking Coliseum—and in her, that strain now woke to conscious life, filling her with strange thoughts and stranger longings, telling her, with a fierce insistence, that no thrill—neither the thrill of a play, nor the thrill of a book, nor the thrill of a screen picture, nor the thrill of dance music, nor even that other headier thrill her adolescence had experienced with Rupert—was comparable to this thrill, to the sheer fearful joy of watching two men join battle with lashing fists.

So Irene sat statue-still; while the gangways filled and filled; while all about her men whispered to one another; while the air grew heavy with the smoke of a thousand cigars; and over all that vast arena there rippled, thrillingly to her thrilling senses, that anticipatory murmur which precedes *the* fight.

The fight, however, apparently, was still not to be; and presently—hardly able, in her impatience, to school her voice—she found herself talking with Rose.

Rose, on his feet and bending across the rail which separated them, wanted to know if she were "enjoying herself." She told him, "Yes. Vastly."

"You're in good company," he went on; and when, still uncertain of her voice, she asked him what he meant, he began to point out various celebrities—here a sporting peer with a sporting hotel-keeper, here a criminal lawyer with a well-known novelist, there a Labour leader very immaculate in his evening dress, there a newspaper man and there a magnate of finance, and there, her powdered face less bluely pallid than those of the other few women in the hall under the arc lamps, an American cinema-star the mere mention of whose name, a bare half-hour ago, would have keyed all the picture-fan in Irene's soul to the keenest interest.

But, for the moment, that interest also had evaporated; and when Rose—his catalogue of celebrities concluded—turned his back on her and re-seated himself, her eyes, meeting Rupert's, were the wide eyes of the woman he hoped to possess.

Those eyes—it seemed to Rupert Starleigh—held a message. "You and I understand," they seemed to be saying, "only you and I understand." And the message fired him anew: so that all his resentment against her disappeared.

Then—all in a flash, as it seemed to Irene's over-wrought

nerves—a dozen figures came climbing through the ropes, people cheered, a loud-voiced person in a bulging shirt-front begged "gentlemen" to "keep their seats," to "keep silence," and "not to smoke," and her eyes—leaving Rupert's—concentrated upon the ring.

§ 4

In the ring—as now seen through the excited eyes of Irene Carslake—only two figures counted. They were both seated, these figures—one, in a black dressing-gown, with its back to her, and the other, in a yellow, facing her across the white square of the boards. And about each of these two figures, as servants round their master, stood a little knot of satellites—burly fellows in woollen sweaters and long flannel trousers whom her inexperience, after a moment's puzzlement, succeeded in recognizing as the seconds.

"On my left," continued the loud-voiced person in full evening-dress, "Bob Brackley, light-heavy-weight champion of England"; and as he made that announcement the figure in the black dressing-gown rose, bowed awkwardly to a storm of cheering, and sat down again; "On my right, Patsy Kynes."

The yellow figure rose now, amid yet more cheering; but already Irene was deaf to coherent sound. Watching those two, the older instincts mounted in her, mounted and mounted till the blood buzzed at her ears, and her eyes, for all their concentration, could scarcely focus the eighteen-foot square of white-washed boards under the arcs.

Those two men! Those two big men about to do battle! Her eyes saw only them. All the rest of the scene—the cameras on their high platforms, the banked tiers of watching faces, the heads at the ring-side, even the burly figures of the seconds—had disappeared, been swallowed up into a quivering blackness.

Now the two were having their hands bandaged, now their gloves were being fastened; and now, eyeing them already half stripped for the fray, Irene Carslake knew herself hypnotized by their semi-nudity, by the pale gleam of the skin on Patsy Kynes' breast and the big rolls of muscle between the thrown-back silk of the dressing-gown and the close-cropped brown hair of Bob Brackley's neck. Then the dressing-gowns were cast aside; the seconds began climbing out of the ring; and for one appreciable instant the stark pictures of naked manhood struck real terror at her soul.

That instant passed. But something of its terror remained,

and she began to be afraid for Kynes, for Patsy Kynes with his slim, almost girlish limbs, and his blond hair, and his pale-gray eyes which reminded her, in some vague way, of Rupert's. That other—that other who sat crouching in his chair—that other, the very outcurve of whose gigantic back-muscles seemed a menace—was going to win, to beat Patsy Kynes, to beat him terribly, to pound blows on his gray-eyed face till the features of it were no longer recognizable, till blood streamed.

Blood! The red apprehension petrified her, turned her very heart to ice. She wanted to scream out that the thing should not begin. But she could not scream; she could only watch while the referee spoke now with one and now with the other of the pair; while the last of the seconds climbed through the ropes; and abruptly—so abruptly that she almost failed to grasp what was happening—the fight began.

The two chairs, on which the two naked men were sitting when she last remembered them, had disappeared. The two naked men were on their feet, making at one another, making for one another diagonally across the ring. Brackley was crouching for his blow. She could still see only the back of Brackley, the flexed shoulder-muscles, the buttocks tautened under their thin drawers, the tensed sinews of his nude calves. But Kynes' face was still clear. Kynes came on tip-toe, one girlish arm reaching forward, one gloved fist guarding his chin. And above that guarding fist, in Kynes' gray eyes, there smouldered a light, a light all of battle, yet akin, marvellously and mysteriously akin, to the light she could rouse in Rupert's when she half-gave herself and half-denied.

"And it is," flashed her brain, "it's the same light"; and even as her brain flashed her that strange message, the naked men met in mid-ring; Brackley's left shot for Kynes' face; Kynes guarded, countered; and they were clinched, breast to breast, Brackley's great arms locking the other's to his ribs.

"Break," called the referee; "Break"; and just before the two broke, Irene saw Brackley's right jab, and jab again, thuddingly as it seemed to her, at the pale body of Patsy Kynes.

Followed out-fighting, out-fighting that turned her heart from ice to fire: the lash of fist for jaw, the smash of blow half-landed, the slither of shod feet, the tense teeth-set breathing of fighting men. Then another clinch—a clinch that shewed her Brackley's face, horrible, sweat pearling it, the mark of the glove on its right cheek, the mouth half-open, the pigs' eyes glinting. Then more out-fighting—Kynes on the defensive, Brackley on the attack.

Always, as she watched the power of Brackley's attack, it

seemed to Irene as though another second, another half-second, would see the fierce blow landed, would see Kynes toppled to the boards. But always, dodging to the ropes, dodging from the ropes, Kynes eluded the blow; and always in his eyes there smouldered that light so mysteriously akin to the light in Rupert's eyes when she half-denied herself to him. Then a bell rang; and, abruptly as it had begun, the round ended.

"Pretty poor," whispered Rupert's voice at her side.

But Irene was still deaf to coherent sound. Fascinated, so sex-fascinated that she could actually feel the pupils of her own eyes swelling to the rim of the iris, she watched the burly men leap back into the ring. They carried buckets, those burly men—buckets and the two chairs and sponges. They were sponging the bodies, the naked bodies of the fighting-men. And Kynes' body was white, white as a woman's. They were lifting his legs now, lifting them and handling them as he lay back in his chair. She sent up a prayer for Kynes, a foolish wisp of a prayer that he should not be hurt by Brackley. "Don't let him bleed," she prayed. "Don't let that white body bleed." And all the time, Brackley was spitting, spitting blood and water from his half-open mouth.

"Seconds out," called the referee. "Time."

On the word they were fighting again, one crouching, the other on tip-toe. She saw Brackley's first real blow flash home, almost soundless, on Kynes' jaw; heard the crowd give its first cheer; saw Kynes flinch, clinch, hang in the clinch; began to hate Bob Brackley for his very manhood, for the very massiveness of his thighs, of his shoulder-muscles. "It isn't fair," said the Englishwoman in her. "It isn't fair." And again she wanted to scream—to scream out that the thing should cease.

But the thing went on. And now she saw more blood, a thin trickle of blood that dripped from the corner of Kynes' mouth. The blood sickened her, seemed to be choking her own mouth. She felt herself gulping, horribly, to rid herself of the blood. "Let it end," flashed her brain. "Somehow, anyhow, let it end."

Yet when the second round did end, when Kynes, saved and saved again by sheer speed of foot, lay back in his chair, panting and heaving while his seconds sponged at his body, she knew herself still insatiate of the battle. "You don't *really* want it to stop," she knew. "You want Kynes to win. You know you want Kynes to win."

So, once more childishly, that creature half child and half woman who was Irene Carslake sent up her little wisp of a prayer; and this time, or so it seemed to her, some god answered it.

For this time, when the bell rang and his seconds sprang from him, she saw Patsy Kynes leap straight across the ring ; saw his right feint and his left shoot out ; saw his straight left hand, once and yet again, on Brackley's face ; saw Brackley's head give back to the blows ; heard the crowd cheer, and felt her heart, fire blent with ice, give one great leap of exultation under her breasts.

" He's going to beat him," flashed her brain. " Kynes is going to beat him."

Another blow, and yet another, went home on Brackley's face. He staggered back on to the ropes. She could see the ropes quiver to the impact of his body. Some of the crowd were on their feet, shouting. She, too, wanted to shout—to shout to Kynes that he should make an end of Brackley.

But already it was too late. Already Brackley had fallen into a clinch. His arms were round Kynes, holding him. She heard the referee's " Break " ; heard a boo from somewhere among the crowd ; heard one call for silence. " The beast," flashed her brain. " The beast. It isn't fair."

The clinch broke, and Brackley covered. They were away from the ropes now, in-fighting, Brackley with his head low, jabbing for the white body of Patsy Kynes. She could see the jabs shaking Kynes ; see their flecks redden the white skin. And now Kynes in his turn clinched, was ordered from the clinch, covered himself, and gave back.

Kynes was giving back before Brackley. Brackley was driving Kynes, driving him in his turn towards the ropes. Brackley's right flashed up, hooking for the jaw-point ; missed. They were at the ropes again—Brackley strong as ever, Kynes weakening. " He's lost," she thought, and even as that thought flashed on her, Kynes stumbled ; fell.

She imagined, and a few others with her, that it was over ; but inside a second Kynes had leaped to his feet.

Kynes was fighting again, fighting—or so it seemed to her—for his life. And that round, too, though blows rained on his body, he outlived.

" What the devil's the matter with the fellow ? " muttered Rupert's disgusted voice.

The fourth round began, ended, in butchery. Kynes had shot his bolt now, and Brackley gave him no quarter. To the ropes he drove him ; and from the ropes ; till Kynes' gray eyes were dazed, glazed ; till the blood streamed from the cut on his mouth, and only the last automatic courage of the fighting-man kept him to his feet.

All through that round, the crowd tried to cheer Brackley,

All through that round, Irene—the blood-choke in her throat—sat hating him for the very certainty of his blows, hating him and praying, voicelessly to the older gods, that some last and wonderful chance should give Kynes the victory.

Yet now—as the fifth round began—even her inexperience saw that there could be no chance for Kynes. His seconds had sponged him again; but no sponging could staunch the blood from his face. His face—as he came from his corner—was gray under the watery blood. And on Brackley, too, she saw blood, little washes of red on his sweat-soaked muscles.

Seeing that red, the choke in her throat became agony. She wanted to see no more, to wrench her eyes away from the ring. But the ring would not let her eyes go. It held them. To her eyes Brackley loomed gigantic—a gigantic executioner. Kynes cowered from him. She saw him prepare to make an end of Kynes; saw him bear down upon Kynes; saw Kynes stagger as he fended the first blow; tried, yet once again, to wrench her eyes from the butchery; failed.

Followed a clinch, and a boo, and a cheer as Brackley broke the clinch and jabbed, terribly, for Kynes' ribs. She saw Kynes' gray face twitch with the sheer pain of the blow; and waited, almost vomiting (as perhaps that Roman ancestress of hers waited, almost vomiting, when the net-thrower's trident lifted above his netted foe), for the end.

Kynes was covering now. And the light, the smouldering light of battle, had gone from his eyes. It seemed to her that there was misery in his eyes—misery and a little of her own terror. Yet the woman in her could still pray for him, voicelessly, to those older gods who never yet heeded the prayers of a woman.

For now, suddenly and terribly, Brackley's fists drove for their man; staggered him; staggered him again. She saw Brackley's right elbow come back; saw his left flash to Kynes' jaw; saw, over Brackley's left shoulder, the gray face of Kynes quiver as the left landed; saw Kynes' hands unguard; saw Brackley's right follow Brackley's left; saw Kynes totter on his tottering feet; saw him topple; heard the thud of his fall; and watched, endlessly, while he rose, gray-faced and bloody, to one knee; while Brackley stood from him; while the referee's hand lifted—lifted and lifted over the kneeling body of Patsy Kynes.

The crowd was hushed now; hushed and hard-breathing. The crowd was waiting for Brackley; for butcher Brackley to finish off his man.

And the man—the man whom she had prayed might beat

Brackley ? He, too, was waiting ; waiting for the saviour seconds to bring a spark of clarity to his dazing brain.

" Nine," counted the referee ; and even as his hand lifted for the last time, Kynes staggered to his feet ; staggered towards Brackley ; staggered into a clinch ; was beaten from the clinch ; was driven, driven towards the ropes. She heard the last body-blow land pile-thudding on Kynes' ribs ; heard the jaw-blow follow the body-blow—and wrenched her death-fearing eyes from the ring just as Kynes fell headlong, and lay motionless on the white of the boards.

" Thirty quid," muttered the utterly disgruntled voice of Rupert Starleigh. " And a damn poor show for it, too."

§ 5

Kynes—would Irene ever forget that just appreciable second when, wrenching her eyes from the boards, she imagined him dead ?—had been lifted to his corner. Brackley had shaken hands with him. The crowd had finished its cheering. The ring—she would never remember how—had emptied. Rupert, bending over the rail, was handing something to Adrian. The crowd had begun to move away.

But she, Irene Carslake, would never be able to move away. She could feel her knees wobbling—shaking where she sat. Her hands, too, were shaking. They were all moist, those hands—as her body was all moist—with perspiration. And suddenly she was hating Rupert—hating him with all her fearful soul.

Why had Rupert let her see this thing ? Why had he let her suffer these terrors—the terror of death, the terror of naked manhood, the terror of blood ? Always, Rupert had sworn that he understood her. And he didn't, he didn't. Otherwise, he would be comforting her now—not talking with Adrian—calmly—as though nothing had happened to *her*—to her whose very entrails had been upon the rack.

At last, her knees steadied. At last, her nerves steadied a little from the terrors which had obsessed them. But her anger against Rupert would not abate, nor, try though she might, could she lift herself from her seat, till a voice—a calm, deliberate, well-modulated voice—dispelled all terrors, and she realized, almost as one who emerges from a trance might realize, that another man had risen from his seat and was bending towards her across the rail.

That other man's eyes were very friendly, very sane. No light.

whether of battle or of desire, smouldered in their blue depths. Looking on them she felt herself growing aware of their trustworthiness, of their essential sincerity.

"You'd better come down this way, Miss Carslake," said the owner of those eyes.

"Had I, Mr. Masterson?" she asked; and her own voice sounded like some stupid stranger's.

"Yes. I'll give you a hand."

He gave her his hand; and as her own rested, hot and small and trembling, in the large, cool comfort of its steady grasp, conscience had its way with her, and she could have cried for shame.

But her sea-green eyes held all the bravery of youth as she faltered, "You—you were quite right, Mr. Masterson. I oughtn't to have come"; and even while she was owning to her mistake, there came to John Masterson—not blindingly but with that quiet light which seems, to such a man, the fullest revelation—love.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

§ 1

In relating, as briefly as possible, the history of our friend, John Masterson, during the period which elapsed between Irene Carslake's departure for the South of France and her return—eight weeks later—to London, there is no need to put him under any psychological, or indeed under any physiological, microscope.

It suffices to repeat that he had fallen in love with the girl, as decent men of his type do fall in love with girls; and to state that, with the revelation of his love, there came also the conviction, peculiar to his simplicity of temperament, that there could be very little, if any, chance of its being reciprocated. "I'm too old for her," he considered. "So that's that."

Even when—as did, of course, occasionally happen—the dream of marriage crossed his mind, he took no steps (not so much as that short step, by the Blue Train, to Mentone) to make the dream reality, contenting himself—or at least imagining he contented himself—with those poetic fantasies which haunt even the most material of young male animals when they come to their mating season.

And since John Masterson, whatever else he might be, was neither young nor a materialist, it followed that—all through the short period now under consideration—those poetic fantasies tinged the whole, plain, everyday fabric of his life.

Take, for instance, the Roses. If John Masterson had not fallen in love with Irene Carslake, it is quite possible that sheer prejudice against the illegality of the playwright's union would have prevented the development of their friendship.

As it was, however, that friendship ripened swiftly towards a real intimacy; and by the end of February, our lover—never realizing that love makes all lovers kin—found himself constantly at meals in that largely luxurious, but by no means extravagantly run, flat, where, meals finished, he met—either in Mrs. Adrian's Georgian drawing-room, or in the square

dignified apartment whose windows overlooked the gray Embankment and whose alcoves housed Adrian's big model stage, his esk and his dictaphone—all sorts and conditions of new people.

These people—journalists in search of copy, actors and actresses in search of parts, cinema-men in search of bargains, and the entire *hoi polloi* of the entertainment world, who inevitably cluster round the successful entertainer—Adrian Rose affected to detest.

"They're all on the make," he would say, after this one or that had departed. To which Mrs. Adrian, who knew her man better than most, would retort, "Don't you believe a word he says, Mr. Masterson. He *likes* having these people about him. They flatter his vanity."

Mostly, however—except on those rare occasions when Rose would rant about the "blasted foolishness of the law"—conversation, once he and Masterson were alone, veered to politics, and more particularly to Rose's latest and most expensive hobby, "The Fellowship of Loyal Citizens."

This Fellowship, originally founded for purposes of his own social advancement by a fussy little literary man of the outer suburbs, and subsequently taken over, in a mood of enthusiastic liberality resulting from the sale of the motion-picture rights in one of his plays, by Adrian, had for its one object, "the combating of each and every form of disloyalty against the Constitution," and for its mode of procedure, "any form of action which may be deemed advisable by the President and Committee."

Masterson, on the whole, thought it rather absurd; but in the end, merely because Rose was so very insistent, he became a member.

For at this period in his existence—and that is why its narration cannot be compressed, as Adrian Rose would compress it, into the single phrase, "Two Months Elapse"—Fate, even that *anangkae* which the Greeks held to be the supreme force in every man's destiny, began to take a hand in Masterson's; and contemporary with his friendship with the Roses, he developed—rather quaintly—a still greater intimacy with Rupert Starleigh.

So that when, at the beginning of March, a provisional settlement of death duties having been arranged with Somerset House, the trust fund in favour of Masterson's four sisters-in-law (thoroughly disgruntled at the provisions of the will, and therefore only communicating through their various solicitors) came up for allocation, it was Starleigh who, dining and wining at Carlton House Terrace, got the order for the two-hundred-thousand pound investment.

"I've always been a lucky sort of a devil," said Rupert Star-

leigh, that evening. "But the greatest piece of luck I ever had in my life was meeting you like that in Piccadilly."

To which John Masterson, his poetic fantasies being for the moment at their goldenest, made a similar reply.

§2

And perhaps the workings of Fate are also to be observed in the relations which existed, during the period still under review, between John Masterson and Ivor Carslake.

The boy, very much the dandy in a brown suit with a mauve pin-stripe, had called at Carlton House Terrace within half an hour of seeing his two sisters off to the Riviera—bringing a message from Irene who was "sorry she had not seen Mr. Masterson to say good-bye," and another from Cynthia Trevor who hoped that he would "shew himself in Sloane Street as soon as ever they got back."

"He's got his sister's voice," thought Masterson, "his sister's hair, his sister's way of putting his head a little on one side when he talks"; and, so thinking, decided not to bother about the month's trial, but to make the boy's appointment more or less a permanency.

Ivor's appointment, however, proved a somewhat limited success. He possessed both brains and a certain modicum of tact. He learnt to type, too, with one slow forefinger, on the old Hammond which Lonsdale, the bespectacled ledger-clerk of Carfax's finding, had unearthed from a pile of lumber in the outer offices. But except over matters that really interested him—matters such as the racing-stable, and the yacht, *Minotaur*, which Masterson, urged thereto by a personal visit from Dunster, its captain, now had a vague idea of putting into commission for the Spring—he lacked the one requisite quality of application. With the result that Masterson could not help an occasional regret that he had not followed his first inclination and offered the post to Mary Millward.

All the same, being hourly, and daily, and weekly more certainly in love with the boy's sister, Masterson put up with him; feeling quite a glow of satisfaction when he began—in a sudden access of zeal—to help Lonsdale with his books.

Meanwhile, of course, being wealthy as he was, and loving as he was, John Masterson's social conscience grew more than ever active: so that, happy in a curious uncertain kind of way, he found the unhappiness of others almost unbearable; and accordingly, no one who, having read of his inheritance in the

newspapers, approached him for a mite of it, failed to reap—worthy and unworthy alike, the most impudent of begging-letter writers with the most respectable of hospital treasurers—his or her considerable harvest.

Charity, however—after he had given away fifty thousand or so to the London hospitals, and written to Frankie Farrar giving him full powers for his own hospital at Addis—began to strike Masterson as mere laziness; and yearning for some more personal, more constructive form of philanthropy he stumbled—fortuitously one rainy afternoon, while looking through those old-fashioned account-books of his father's which, as Tom Withers had suggested, held many things to surprise a man—on the information that he possessed, in Thameside South of all places, a property known as "Humblestone Street," and its adjoining wharf.

Inquiring about this property from Carfax (who had lumped it, with various others, under the heading "Real Estate" in his accounts) he was referred to James Haringford, who referred him back to 'my son Dick.'

"All I know," said 'my son Dick,' "is that most of the rents are in arrear. What would you like me to do? See if I can get you an offer for the place?"

"No," said Masterson, remembering his one glimpse of Thameside South. "No. What I'd like you to do is to take me down."

So next day, they inspected Humblestone Street; and Humblestone Street, to put it mildly, shocked them to their well-fed vitals.

For in Humblestone Street was hell, even that hell which breeds, more surely than any propaganda, revolution—a hell of grimed brick rabbit-hutches on whose foul doorsteps scrofulous children scratched and fought with one another while slatternly mothers looked on uncaring, and slatternly fathers, hopelessness in their eyes, lounged shirt-sleeved and mufflered between the gin-palace which was one end of the alley and the pawnbroker's shop which was the other.

And, "My God," thought John Masterson as he passed through that alley. "My God, is this dung-heap mine?"

§ 3

All the way back to Carlton House Terrace, in a car whose very petrol seemed to have been bought with blood money, John Masterson thought of his dead father—and the thought was as a

thorn in his brain. All night, visions of Humblestone Street haunted him as though they were his own crime. And next morning every instinct in him urged that Humblestone Street must disappear, be razed to the ground, be re-builded. And quickly—quickly ere it be too late.

But the Humblestone Streets of England are not to be transformed by a pen-stroke; and in this, his first brush with that greatest of all social bugbears, housing reform, John Masterson suffered partial defeat.

The gin-palace proprietor, approached by one of Haringford's clerks, sent back a message to say that "*he* wouldn't mind taking a bit to shift, but his missus had a fancy for the neighbourhood." The pawnbroker, written to, replied in four pages of Yiddish that he was a poor man, that he had been born in Humblestone Street, and that—unless, of course, the compensation were on a really liberal scale—he would just as soon die there as anywhere else.

While as for the people whom Masterson's idealism sought mainly to benefit, they—half of the grimy houses turned out to have been under-let, and from the others his tenants, fearing lest they should have to pay prompt rent in their next lodgings, resolutely refused to budge—set up such a howl of protest that Sir James Britwell, the Chancery Court K.C. to whom Haringford sent him, formulated the immediate opinion, "If you try to pull down those houses, Mr. Masterson, you'll have ten thousand pounds' worth of eviction cases on your hands—to say nothing of the *Daily Herald* screaming at you for a brutal capitalist who wants to pitch honest working-men out of their hard-earned homes."

So Masterson, his fair-mindedness recognizing that it would do no immediate good to pull down the roofs over his tenants' heads, decided to leave the alley alone and put up a model dwelling on the site of the wharf.

"Apparently," he told Ivor, after his first interview with Laurence Aubreystone, a brisk young architect, of Rose's race, whom Rose had discovered for him, "once I've found somewhere to put the poor devils, I can *make 'em* go. Till then, I'm powerless."

Neither Ivor Carslake, however, nor Rose, who had just "gone broody" (the phrase is Rose's own) with the plot of a new play; nor Starleigh, proved particularly interested in Masterson's new scheme: and in the end the only two people to whom he shewed Aubreystone's draft specifications were Tom Withers and Mary Millward.

The incident happened quite fortuitously, the very day before Irene Carslake returned to London, on a rush visit to Mastersleigh, the real purpose of which was to see The Animal do his last gallop before the Sandown meeting.

Arriving at the stables a little before time (the last of the March frosts had left enough " bone " in the ground to make the jumps too risky before mid-day) he heard that Tom was at The Cedars ; and walking over, found Mary there.

They were discussing—or at least Tom was—some question of repairs ; and after Mary had given her price, Masterson, his mind still full of his scheme, produced the specifications from his overcoat pocket, asking, quite unseriously, as he handed them over, " And what could your firm quote me for a job like this ? "

Mary, whose sense of humour, usually strong, happened—at that moment—to be in complete abeyance, took the specifications without a word ; and while she was scrutinising them, Masterson, the complete enthusiast, began explaining his scheme to Tom.

" But how's it going to be made to pay, Mr. John ? " interrupted Tom, at a pause in that explanation.

" It isn't meant to pay," answered he.

" But it ought to pay, Mr. Masterson." All the commonsense of the class that had sired her, and all the bitterness of her own experience with labour, crisped Mary Millward's downright voice as she spoke. " It ought to pay at least four per cent. If it doesn't you're only pauperizing people, pampering them, giving them something they're not entitled to possess."

Masterson, a picture of Humblestone Street in his mind's eye, did his best to answer the question ; but Mary's criticism struck home.

" Isn't it just more charity ? " she went on. " Wouldn't it be better to build these dwellings on an economic basis ? Then—if they were a success—you could build others—go on building—be of some real constructive use."

Again, the argument went home ; and Masterson, shifting awkwardly from one big foot to the other, could find no answer ; while old Tom, who knew much, but suspected more, about the financial situation of " W. J. Millward, Builder, Cabinet-maker and Contractor," stood tap-tap-tapping at his mahogany gaiters with his long-thonged whip.

It wasn't a particularly pleasant job—thought old Tom—in fact, sugar it, it was about *the* most unpleasant job in the world to suggest that Mary might do better for herself away from Lipstone. Still, for Mary's own sake, it ought to be done.

And accordingly, after the manner of his kind, Tom did the job, saying, quite casually, his eyes avoiding those of the woman he loved : " I've just been thinking, Mr. John—you 'll excuse me, won't you, if it's an impertinence—that when this scheme of yours gets a little more on its legs, or possibly sooner, you'll want somebody with a bit more brains, and a bit more knowledge of figures, and possibly a bit more understanding of the building trade than young Carslake—somebody more like Mary here, if you see what I'm driving at, Mr. John—to help you get it past the post."

§ 4

None of which—including Masterson's casual answer, " My dear Tom, if Miss Millward hadn't got her own business to look after, there's no one I'd rather have to look after mine," and Mary Millward's, " I wonder what you'd say if I *were* to take that suggestion seriously, Mr. Masterson "—would be worth while recording, did it not shew the mysterious workings of that mysterious force which the wise Greeks called, " *anangkae* "; otherwise, Fate.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

§ 1

"WELL, if you were to ask me, I should say that the Masterson man was in love with you."

"But I wasn't aware that I *had* asked you."

"I didn't say you *had*; I said, 'if you were to.' You might do worse, you know, dear."

"I wish you'd shut up, Cynthie."

"All right. I'll shut up."

The two sisters were sitting—ready for Sandown, race-glasses on their laps and their eyes on the cheap clock which did nothing to adorn Cynthia's silver table—in the Frenchified front drawing-room of 77a, Sloane Street. They had been back six days now; and, all through those six days, the sex-acuteness in Cynthia Trevor had been on the alert.

Her suspicion about Masterson, of course—and that was why she had voiced it so gingerly—seemed too good to be true. Men with millions, men who lived in Carlton House Terrace, and owned yachts, and ran race-horses, and paid a couple of hundred for a hunter that took their fancy at Tats, didn't really fall in love—outside fiction—with one's penniless younger sister. And yet—just for once—why shouldn't the fiction-thing come true?

"Anyway, let's pray for it," decided the silent Cynthia; and her thoughts, perpending her own youth, went on: "Let's work for it, too. Celibacy doesn't suit us Carslakes. And I wouldn't trust friend Rupert an inch farther than I could see."

Meanwhile Irene, in a thoroughly bad temper, continued to watch the clock. Cynthie was crazy. She didn't believe "all that rot" about "Mr. Masterson." "Mr. Masterson" *wasn't* in love with her—to begin with, because he wasn't "a bit that sort of man"; and to go on with, because . . .

Oh, well, just because!

The clock ticked on, fretting Irene's nerves; and presently—her ill-temper in no wise eased by observing that some secret

thought had curved Cynthie's thin lips to their most irritating smile—she rose; walked to the windows, and looked out across Sloane Street.

Across Sloane Street—in the gardens beyond the motor-thronged roadway—spring had almost come. There, already, trees were green and daffodils golden. Quite soon—if this sunshine only lasted—the first of the lilac would be budding.

"What's the use of being cross?" thought Irene. "Cynthie doesn't understand what's worrying me. She didn't mean to be beastly. She only meant to be kind."

But though Irene's temper, never a sulky one, was even now waning, the worry still fretted her nerves.

"Some things"—in plain words, her present relations with John Masterson—really were being "rather jolly." Monday's lunch-party, for instance! She *had* liked Monday's lunch-party—just the four of them, he and Ivor, herself and Cynthie—alone at that nice window-table in the Ritz. And then Tuesday! Tuesday had been jollier still. It had been Tuesday, hadn't it, when, calling to fetch Ivor (by the way, why *had* she called to fetch Ivor?), he met her, quite by accident, in the hall; and shewed her over his funny, old-fashioned house?

But "other things"—in plain words, her present relations with Rupert—were being very much the reverse of "jolly." Last night, for instance. And then Sunday! Why on earth had she let Rupert take her to his rooms on Sunday? Why on earth hadn't she told him—the moment she came back from Mentone—that things couldn't go on?

Things with Rupert couldn't go on, because . . .

Oh, well, just because!

Having reached which precise indecision, Irene, still at the window, perceived the least ancient of the plum-coloured Daimlers—Ivor on the box seat with Rogers—glide largely round the corner of the gardens and curve to a full stop outside the yellow-varnished front-door.

§ 2

It would be an over-statement of fact to say that Rupert Starleigh—as he watched Ivor Carslake waving a visible stick to an invisible sister—was suffering from any conscious jealousy towards his friend and client, John Masterson. Just as it would be a positive mis-statement of fact even to suggest that John Masterson, when the two sisters—Irene, looking her most attractive in a heather-purple racing-coat, with a heather-purple

hat rammed modishly to the thin curves of her dark eyebrows—eventually came out to them, experienced any jealousy, conscious or otherwise, towards him.

Both men, nevertheless—as they gave up the rear seat of the limousine—were a trifle on edge: Masterson because his status of dumb worshipper was already beginning to grow irksome; and Starleigh because he had heard, the evening before, from a man who happened to have witnessed it, all about that "jolly little lunch-party" at the Ritz.

But once the big car got under way, both men—the one because of that blind self-confidence which suspects any rival except the rival under its immediate nose, and the other because, even though the status of dumb worshipper irked him, he could not yet conceive himself in any other—forgot their troubles, and chatted amicably enough about the forthcoming race.

"Cautious blokes, these owners!" chaffed Starleigh, when, for the tenth time since leaving Sloane Street, Masterson refused, even under Cynthia's most insistent pressure, to admit that his horse had anything more than a fairish chance for the three-thirty. "Blowed if I can make up my mind, John, whether you've backed this moke of yours to win, or laid him to lose. By the way—I haven't had so much as a squint at the papers this morning—who's riding him for you?"

"Luckett."

"Not Ted of that ilk?"

"Yes. Ted Luckett."

"But I say"—Starleigh's gray eyes were reminiscent—"isn't old Ted getting a bit long in the tooth? It must be the best part of twenty years since I saw him ride that horse of your governor's—The Minotaur, wasn't it?—in the National."

"Luckett's forty," said Masterson, "just our age, Rupert"; and again—for no reason immediately apparent to either of them—both men felt themselves on edge.

"Forty!" repeated Starleigh, recovering his balance quicker than Masterson. "Then I apologize to Luckett. Forty's the prime of a man's life. Don't you agree, Irene?"

Irene, however—though a meaning glance accompanied the question—did not respond. Instead, she continued to cross-examine Masterson about his horse; till presently, watching the pair of them, Rupert Starleigh felt his perturbations returning. Nor did those perturbations diminish when—her younger sister falling silent—Cynthia Trevor gave a fresh turn to the talk.

In a fortnight—began Cynthia—Tom ought to be back from Morocco. And as soon as Tom *did* get back from Morocco—went

on Cynthia—Mr. Masterson absolutely *must* re-meet him. And in order to facilitate that re-meeting—concluded Cynthia—she proposed giving a dinner-party, "a very special little dinner-party, not in a restaurant, but just quietly—at home."

And, "'Ware that woman," counselled his long-dead Norman ancestor to Rupert Starleigh. "'Ware that sly woman! It won't be her fault if Irene doesn't set her cap at John."

§ 3

"Lunch is on me. You four cut along and look at the gee-gees while I'm seeing about a table." Starleigh—once more his merriest self—made the announcement as their car dropped the last of the Esher road behind its wheels.

"Not a bit of it," protested Masterson, as they circled under the white wood archway into the race-ground. "This is *my* show."

"I'll toss you for it, John."

"All right, Rupert, if you insist."

So the two men matched coins; and Starleigh got his way; and Irene Carslake, letting Masterson hand her to the ground, and walking side by side with him up the green slope of turf which leads away from the unpretentious Club buildings towards the paddock and the weighing-room and the boxes, caught herself wondering whether—by any chance—Cynthia had been right.

"Would I like this man to be in love with me?" she asked herself; and finding no immediate answer to the question, let her thoughts dwell—all resentfully—on that glance which Rupert's gray eyes had flashed her in the car. Why hadn't she broken things off with Rupert? Why *couldn't* she break things off with Rupert? She *must* break things off with Rupert before . . . before the time came when she, too, lost her head.

But somehow that last decision—even though, ever since the fight, she had had no more illusions about the man—depressed her; and after a second or so, she managed to dismiss Rupert from her mind.

"Your horse *is* going to win," she asked. "Isn't he, Mr. Masterson?"

"I hope so."

"But aren't you fearfully keen that he should?"

"I suppose I am really, Miss Carslake." It was one of this man's greatest attractions—thought Irene—that he always took you seriously. "But if he doesn't——"

"If he doesn't"—it was one of this girl's greatest charms,

thought Masterson, that her intelligence never made you complete a sentence—" you'll take it, just as you take everything else, philosophically. You are a philosopher, aren't you? I mean, you don't get excited about things."

They walked on in silence, the tiny conversation eating its way into John Masterson's brain. Philosophy! Was he really a philosopher? Was his particular brand of philosophy really worth while? Wasn't the other brand—the accepted brand—better? Wasn't the main thing in life to win, to get what one desired? And didn't he, John Masterson, desire, very desperately . . .

But before that last desire—a desire which had nothing to do with the winning of steeplechases—could quite formulate itself, they reached the boxes, to find Tom Withers, very much the old-fashioned trainer in his short-tailed coat and gold-pinned Ascot tie, talking in low conspiratorial tones to Ted Luckett, still in his tweeds, with a pair of raw-hide racing leathers slung casually over one arm and the usual over-large cap slung casually over one eye.

" He's a cert at the weight, sir," whispered Luckett, after Masterson had introduced old Tom to Irene, and old Tom, admiration in the very lift of his gray bowler hat, had led Irene into The Animal's stable. " A bloomin' cast-iron cert—or my name's Queer Street. I came up with 'im meself, sir, being a bit nervous like about the way he'd travel. There's nothing like boxing 'em oneself when they're hot 'uns—as I think you'll be the first to agree. But he travelled alright, sir. And you can take it from me he *is* alright. A regular bit of alright—if he is a hugly one."

Ted Luckett, having delivered himself thus, touched his cap and departed to his " vittles "; while Masterson, followed by Cynthia and Ivor, joined Irene in the stable.

" You be careful of his heels, Miss," Tom Withers was telling her. " But never you mind about his eye. There isn't much he can't see out of that wall-eye of his. And looks don't win jumping-races. So you won't do much harm—at least not in my humble opinion—if you put a bit of your pin-money on him for a place. You'll be lucky, though, if you get more tban tens. You see "—and here old Tom, who had his little vanities, permitted himself a smile—" some of the bookies haven't quite forgotten that I used to train winners at Mastersleigh."

" But is he really a winner? " Ivor spoke; and there was excitement in his voice. " Could one make a real packet by backing him? "

" You might, sir "—Tom Withers, no bad judge of a man or a

boy, had taken no great fancy to this one—" and then again, you mightn't. I hope *you're* satisfied, Mr. John."

" He looks fit enough, Tom." Masterson, Irene momentarily forgotten, was examining his horse. The Animal did look fit—fit as a fiddle. Under the turned-back rug the dark hairs of his strawberry-roan coat shone as a girl's hair shines after henna. Even his wall-eye, as it surveyed the unaccustomed crowd in the box, gleamed with that healthy confidence which is a race half-won. " But will he take to the game—that's the question ? "

" Exactly, Mr. John." Withers dry-shaved his clean-shaven chin with a cautious hand. " Exactly."

" Meaning, Tom ? "

" Meaning, Mr. John "—the trainer, choosing his words with care, broke off for a moment to give his, " Good morning, m'lord " to Rupert Starleigh who had just entered the box—" meaning, Mr. John, that if I were as sure of him over water as I am over fences, I shouldn't have suggested Miss Carslake only backing him for a place."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

§ 1

OLD TOM—though Masterson pressed him to lunch with them—refused. Nor, equally pressed by Cynthia to vouchsafe a more definite opinion about The Animal's chances, would he add anything to his previous statement. Accordingly, as the five of them took the gravel path by the trees and so came across the concrete to the luncheon-room, Cynthia Trevor was in two minds about her bet on the three-thirty.

"I shall wait," said Cynthia. "I shall wait and see how I do on the other races before I come to any *real* decision."

Starleigh, however, declaring he had a "hunch," went off to send a telegram; and by the time they sat down to their meal—it was early yet and the big glass-sided restaurant only half full of lunchers—Cynthia had decided to "risk a couple of Bradburys each way."

"Why not make it five?" said Ivor. "And I'll go halves with you. Oh, and by the way, sir"—he turned to Masterson—"what about you?"

"For myself"—a week ago, our friend had decided that, with his income, there could be no more fun in betting—"nothing. But if your bookie's all right, put me on a fiver each way, twice, once for Withers and once for Luckett."

"Oh, you millionaires!" sighed Cynthia Trevor over the wing of a chicken. "You needn't even bet. It's only paupers like ourselves who have to earn our livelihood by racing. And how much are *you* going to have on Mr. Masterson's horse, Irene?"

"As much as I dare. I'm certain—*abso-lutely* certain—that he's going to win."

The girl's tone—the look she gave Masterson as she spoke—did not please Rupert Starleigh. Once more, however, self-confidence banished fear; and presently, eyeing her across the table, the sensualist in him began to day-dream. How delicious was this Irene, how fatally delicious to any man of

temperament. Even her reluctances had their charm; put the Spring into one's blood.

Luncheon over, she let him pilot her to the paddock; and, leaning over the rails to watch the horses for the first race led round, appeared to take the old pleasure in his conversation as he pointed out first one and then another sporting celebrity—'Snowy' Buggins, who had commanded the Fifth D.G.s, and the Duke of Rockhampton, who married his cook, and 'Piker' Marston, hero of the latest divorce-case, and Nell Arthurson, about whom he whispered the spiciest of spicy scandals.

In fact, by the time they reached the Grand Stand, and he had shepherded her to her seat, she seemed so entirely his, that he had no hesitation in leaving her alone with "old John" and "that cat Cynthia" while he went off, accompanied by Ivor, to "see what was doing in the ring."

Once he had left her, the attraction his physical nearness always exercised over Irene disappeared; and, talking with Masterson, she blamed herself more than a little for the weakness which had made her so affable. But once the numbers went up on the board; and the horses she had watched in the paddock came down the gravel slope by the trees; once the horses were cantering to the start and she had unslung her glasses, she abandoned herself to the business of the afternoon.

For racing and 'chasing were in this girl's very blood. The big fence-barred semi-circle of the white-railed track; the high number-board; the judge's box; the Silver Ring with its tick-tack signallers; the crowd of cheery well-dressed folk on the Stand; the thicker crowd on the slope of ground below; the bookies leaning on their rail—all these, with the sun still shining, golden among high windy clouds that sent black shadows skimming across the green turf, and the noise of the voices calling the last of the odds, sent shudders—little shudders of sheer delight—all through her young body.

She stood up as the horses reached the starting-post; and watched them—her glasses momentarily forgotten—her lips half parted and all the zest of youth concentrated on its pleasure in her sea-green eyes. While John Masterson—his glasses also forgotten—watched only her.

Perhaps, in that little moment before the flag fell, his love for her touched its real zenith. For as yet it had had no fear in it, that love, and hardly a spark of passion, only joy—joy in her young beauty, joy in her companionship, the joy, fatherly and not loverly, that he should be giving her this pleasure. And if—subconsciously—he wanted to give her more pleasure; to give

her all the pleasures the world could offer to the young; to shower on her, out of his great abundance, diamonds, and pearls, and emeralds, and money, thousands upon ten thousands of that money from which his own soul recoiled, those wants, too, were more fatherly than loverly, selfless, craving for no return.

"They're off," she said, turning to him—for just one infinitesimal fraction of a second—a face white with sheer excitement, the black lashes fluttering like butterfly-wings under the rim of her heather-purple hat. Then the face averted itself; and, together in body though apart in soul, they watched, now raising their glasses and now lowering them, the 'chase picture galloping by—the bunch at the first fence; the flash of seven jackets at the second; a blue jacket somersaulting at the third; a red jacket leading the field as they dwindled round the bend; a rush of dwindled figures for water, with red jacket over, and white jacket challenging; red jacket and white jacket together, coming closer now, closer and closer, with the cap-colours shewing and the field tailed out and a riderless horse still galloping blind; and now white jacket leading, leading over the last of the fences; leading and landing and striding for home.

"*I* backed him!" cried Irene Carslake as white jacket and cerise cap steadied his big chestnut, to a few cheers, beyond the winning-post. "*I* backed Ginger Buttons! I backed him because I liked his name. And I've won three whole pounds on him. Isn't it ripping? Isn't it too ripping for words?"

§ 2

In the next race, also—by which time Starleigh and Ivor had rejoined them—Irene backed the winner; and after it was over, Cynthia Trevor, very wise in her generation, took Starleigh away, calling shrill-voiced as they wandered down from the Stand, "You come, too, Ivor—and help me find my bookie."

So Ivor—instructed by his younger sister, "If by any chance I don't see you again, put everything I've won, each way, on The Animal"—followed his elder, leaving Masterson and his Irene as alone as two people can be at Sandown Park.

"Aren't you going to bet on this race?" he asked her, his mind just a little less steady than his voice.

"No," she laughed. "I don't fancy anything this time; and besides, I'm going to make all I want on The Animal."

She laughed once more, youth's own laugh of joyous confidence: and hearing her, John Masterson's heart sank.

Suddenly he felt old, clumsy, tongue-tied, no companion for this bright young beauty with the zestful eyes.

The horses for the short third race came down the slope; cantered past; started; flashed round the course—and again as they watched the 'chase together, now raising their glasses and now lowering them, desires, desires half-formulated, came thronging to his brain.

"You see," she said, when the numbers rose on the board. "I was quite right not to bet." And then, abruptly—so abruptly that the inconsequent words took him altogether aback—"Mr. Masterson, do you know what I'd like to do? I'd like to see the next race—*your* race—from one of the jumps. From the water-jump if I could. That'll be the test, won't it? So Mr. Withers said."

"But the others," began Masterson, wool-gathering, "your sister——"

"Oh, never mind Cynthie."

Already, as she spoke, Irene had risen from her seat. Already, as he followed her along the gangway, Masterson could feel the heart thumping a little under his ribs. But at the foot of the steps, she paused; and watching her as she turned to face him, it seemed to him that he read another message, a message all of contrite indecision, in her sea-green eyes.

"Am I being selfish?" she asked.

"Why selfish, Miss Carslake?"

"Well"—the voice, too, sounded contrite—"ought I to drag you away like this? Don't you want to have a last word with your jockey? Or your trainer? Wouldn't you rather watch from the stand? Wouldn't we see better from here?"

"I doubt it." Masterson, his heart steady again, lied like a man. "And anyway, as it's The Animal's first race, I'd rather like to see exac tly how he shapes at his fences."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really!"

"Then let's hurry up."

The contrite look faded; and Irene led on again, dodging her way through the crowd; while Masterson followed, almost as some big dog might follow, at her heel.

They came, Masterson, still at heel, to the rails, to an opening in the rails; and, side by side across the hoof-scarred green of the finish, to the Outside Ring. And there, just for a moment, Irene halted for the second time.

Halting, she was again aware, very pleasurably, of her power

over this man, of the essential difference between him and Rupert Starleigh.

"I believe Cynthie *is* right," she thought, eyeing the sharps, and the tipsters, and the tick-tackers, and the old gipsy-woman selling oranges, and a little knot of backers clustering round the steps of an old-fashioned van, from under whose banner, on which was scrolled "You're safe with the old firm," an enormous red-faced bookie in an enormous gray top-hat kept shouting, "Ten to one, The Animal. Five to one, The Triton. Two to one, Silver Slippers. Four to one, The Field." But the thought gave her no pleasure, only a sharp twinge of fear, because . . .

Oh, well, just because!

She covered her momentary fear with prattle, repeating, her temples wrinkled under the stress of mathematical calculations, "Ten to one, The Animal. Do you know what I stand to win, Mr. Masterson? Why it's—it's the best part of fifty pounds!"

"As much as that, Miss Carslake?"

"More than that." A limited dress-allowance had trained Irene, as not Ivor, to accuracy in figures. "Quite a lot more."

They went on again, leaving the Outside Ring behind them, towards the centre of the big course. Now they were quite alone; and in the large solitude, thought troubled them both. Irene's prattle ceased. She walked in silence, wondering what impulse had made her suggest this thing; wondering why she should feel so self-conscious, so conscience-stricken. While in Masterson, too, was wonder, wonder at the sudden uprush of his own emotions. "Philosophy," said those emotions—"what's the use of philosophy? A man must have his desire."

They came—Irene once more the prattler—Masterson still emotion-torn, but steadying himself as a horse steadies itself down a hill—to the three big jumps on the far side of the course. At each of these—by the guard-railed brushwood which leads to the water, by the fenced water itself, and at the third, stiffest fence on the bend—stood a few people. Between the water-jump and the third fence was a sort of raised shelter, rather like a box. As they were inspecting the water-jump, a big policeman cantered up; dismounted; and began to make a trifling adjustment to the headstall of his big black horse.

"War-veteran?" asked Masterson, noticing the strip of silver-starred Mons ribbon on the brow-band of the headstall.

"Yes, sir." The policeman just indicated his own medal-ribbons. "Both of us. This one was through the Retreat.

Officer's charger, so I've heard say. And a good horse he is, too, though a bit of a handful in traffic."

The constable remounted; saluted them, and rode away. Irene unslung her glasses, levelled them at the Stand. "They're just putting the numbers up," she said. "But I can't see a *thing* from here. Let's get up into that box."

She walked off, almost ran off, and following, he helped her up.

From where they now stood, practically the whole course was visible. Glasses out again, they saw the nine horses emerge from behind the trees which hid the paddock, come down the gravel slope, and on to the course. Silver Slippers, a gray (green jacket and green cap), came first; then The Triton, a chestnut (black jacket and pink cap); last of all—a stable-boy at his head; Luckett, in Masterson's plum-colour and blue, sticking tight as wax to his uneasy saddle—The Animal.

The Animal's temper was at its hottest. He bucked as the stable-boy let go his head; then reared; then went off like a shot from a gun. They could just see the fight Luckett had to stop him, to turn him, to canter him past the Stand.

"Is he always like that?" asked Irene, a little of her confidence evaporating.

The Animal simmered down as Luckett got him to the post; and Masterson, watching the nine jackets line up for the start, watching his colours wheel and wheel again, experienced no misgivings. He tried to tell Irene as much; but Irene did not seem to hear. "The child!" he thought—and the thought was sheer pain.

For now, once again, Irene was all excitement—her whole attention concentrated on the picture in her race-glasses. He could see that every muscle in her body was tense; that her teeth were biting hard at her underlip, that her free hand, ungloved and clenching on the wooden upright of the shelter, shewed ivory to the tiny knuckle-bones.

The nine horses broke from the line; false-started; were ordered back, with The Animal, next to the rails, growing restive. Then, all in a flash, the flag dropped, and they were off. "That's all right," thought the horseman in John Masterson. But the man in him was thinking more about Irene.

Irene's pose had not altered, nor had she taken the glasses from her eyes. Her glasses shewed her the nine horses sweeping forward; sweeping for the first fence; clearing the fence with hardly a head between them; galloping on to the bend.

At the bend, Silver Slippers drew clear, with The Triton a

length behind. The Animal lay fifth. Or was it sixth? Yes—sixth! Her heart dropped a beat. Why was the Animal lying sixth? Why did it look as though Luckett were holding him back?

They passed the bend; and whipping the glasses from her eyes, she turned to Masterson. But Masterson kept silence. She rather hated him for keeping silence; turned her back on him; watched the brown line of the guard-railed brushwood.

Now, the brushwood hid the horses from her. But now she could hear them—hear the first faint drum-beat of six-and-thirty hoofs. The drum-beat quickened—quickened; and now, suddenly, she saw them again.

Silver Slippers still led the field. But The Triton was making up his distance. The Animal still lay sixth. The Triton gained—kept on gaining. Triton and Silver Slippers were level again; level and racing for the brushwood. She saw pink cap and green cap rise together; saw the horse-heads high; heard a hind hoof rap the guard-rail; saw them both over—over and hareing for the water. The hoof-beats were deafening now—thunder in her ears.

She looked back again; saw three horses fly the brushwood in echelon; saw blue cap, then plum-coloured jacket; saw The Animal, still sixth, land like a cat; saw Luckett, seventy yards from the water, take a pull at his reins.

Louder and louder came the hoof-beats. The Triton was at the water. She watched him rise at the low fence; watched his chestnut forehand lift; caught a glimpse of a lean face under the pink cap; saw the lean face set as it cleared fence and water; knew The Triton safely over and galloping on.

Silver Slippers followed, splashing as he came over. She looked to the four in pursuit; saw Luckett sit down in his saddle; gather The Animal under him; take the last pull; and send the wall-eyed horse arrow-straight at the water-jump.

That was the one moment in the 'chase, when Masterson experienced misgiving. For in that moment Luckett's face shewed Luckett's mind; and the horseman in John Masterson knew that mind; knew it as though it were his own. This was the test. If The Animal slackened a pace now—good-bye to his chance. . .

But The Animal—his jockey's thighs gripping back, his jockey's hands reaching forward—slackened never a pace, faltered never a stride as the four came racing, racing all in a bunch, racing all hell-for-leather, at the low fence and the water; and John Masterson, even Irene momentarily forgotten, saw the four take

off together ; saw The Animal gather hocks under belly ; saw his forehand lift and the whole of him come flying—flying it clean to a grin from Luckett.

" That's a horse," he muttered. " And a real horse, too." Then his mind came back to Irene.

Irene, however, had not heard. Her eyes, her mind, her whole soul were with Luckett. Once over the water, Luckett was taking no chances. He had The Animal in hand now ; and was forcing the pace. He went up. Up and up. Triton took the fence at the bend clean. Silver Slippers went at it slanting. She saw The Animal catch Silver Slippers as they landed, pass him ; picked up her glasses again as blue cap raced pink cap round the rails.

Passing the Stand for the first time round, Triton's black jacket seemed to increase his lead. But Silver Slippers was already beaten and the rest of the field tailed out to nowhere. " Can he win ? " she kept asking herself. " Can Luckett win ? " And again, in her excitement, she put down her glasses and turned to Masterson.

" Is it all right ? " she asked.

" Barring accidents, yes ! "

This time, he did not keep silence ; but stood there, his own glasses to his eyes, telling her how they ran, " There's nothing to worry about—Luckett can go up when he likes—he's going up now—they were level at that fence—he's leading by half-a-length—by a length. Triton's challenging now. But he can't hold him. You watch when they come over."

So Irene watched ; watched the last of the real struggle.

Triton was leading again, leading by the merest head as they raced for the water. But even before Luckett sat down to take the last steadying pull at The Animal's reins, she saw The Triton's head drop back ; and saw The Animal come on, come on like a driven partridge, to fly the water with one clean leap that sent the very heart into her mouth as he landed a length ahead, and galloped away—taking the fence at the bend in his stride—to almost certain victory.

But victory—certain victory—was still not yet ; and with a little, almost inarticulate cry she snatched up her glasses for the last time ; and, glueing them to her eyes, stood taut as some statue of Diana, while The Triton followed The Animal over, while Silver Slippers came by, and the rest of the field after Silver Slippers . . . and John Masterson—his race, his horse, his jockey, his very self forgotten—watched only her.

For suddenly, strangely, stabbingly, just when that little

almost inarticulate cry broke from Irene's lips, it had seemed to John Masterson that every half-formulated desire in his brain took the shape of one desire ; and, even as she dropped her glasses ; even as—her eyes shining like phosphorous on tropic seas and both hands outstretched for him—she said, childishly in her high childish voice, " He's won. Your horse has won ! Oh, aren't you glad ? I am. I couldn't have borne it if he'd been beaten," it seemed to him as though the shape of that one desire were the shape of physical passion, and his love for her a mere hankering of the flesh.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

§ 1

To your thoughtful student of the great tragi-comedy, Human Life, no phenomenon is more interesting than the sharpness of certain men's recoil from the physical emotion without which they would never have come to birth; and John Masterson's first recoil from the knowledge of his physical passion for Irene Carslake was—as the knowledge which provoked it—an affair of seconds, of less than seconds, an affair almost as immediate as a gun-spring's recoil. In one moment, he desired; in another, the mere understanding that his desire was a desire of the body had tautened all the fundamental Puritan in him to the most obstinate revolt.

When their hands met again as he helped her down from the shelter, the contact—though it thrilled—chilled him. And when they began to make their way back across the course, he could hardly bring himself to speak with her for fear lest his voice should betray his thoughts.

So they came—Irene all excited with her win—away from the three jumps; past the mounted policeman who, saluting them, hid the ghost of a grin; past the Outside Ring where the red-faced bookie, also grinning (though for a different reason), jingled silver in his satchel as he paid out the few wise ones among his clients; past the rails, and through the crowd, and up the gravel slope till they reached The Animal's stable.

And even there—even though the first of the shock was over—Masterson's mood held. He could get no pleasure from the little scene—from the sight of the good horse still smoking after his effort, while the groom wisped him, and Ted Luckett, saddlery over arm, watched him as a mare watches her new-born foal, and old Tom, grinning even more than the red-faced bookie, opined that, "The Mastersleigh Stable might yet win the National."

Presently, Cynthia and Ivor joined them in the box; and presently, Rupert Starleigh.

There was a queer look in Rupert Starleigh's gray eyes when they first fell upon Irene, but after a moment or so, the look veiled itself under thick lashes, while Rupert patted his friend on the back, and Ivor wrung Luckett by the hand, and Cynthia —inwardly chuckling at her successful strategy—decided they should " make for home."

" After *that*," decided Cynthia, " I don't think we want to see any more. I'm sure *I* don't. And it's beginning to get cold; looks as if it might rain, too, now the sun's gone."

§ 2

The sun *had* gone by the time they found their car; and an April storm burst before they made Sloane Street, where Masterson, mumbling excuses, refused Cynthia's invitation to come in.

" But there's fizz," protested Cynthia. " Two whole bottles of Tom's best fizz. I got it out on purpose this morning—just in case The Animal should win." And Irene, too, protested, her hand holding his while he stood there in the rain.

Masterson, however—still recoiling—persisted in the refusal; and a moment or so later drove off.

That last touch of Irene's ungloved hand had set his pulses racing; but his thoughts—as Rogers settled philosophically behind the traffic-block the storm had caused in Knightsbridge—seemed steady enough.

Funking facts—he thought—never did a man any good; and this fact, this new and passionate fact, had to be faced.

" You're forty," he told himself. " She's nineteen. Heart-whole. Care-free. Make an end of this . . . this friendship. Go away—for a month—for two months. Forget. It won't matter to her. She doesn't care for you. How could she care for you? And besides—this is passion, not love at all."

At that, recoil tensening in him, it seemed as though his passion sullied her, sullied all his other desires. Then, for a tiny while, he caught himself dreaming—dreaming of having Irene for his wife.

His car moved on again, slowly through the slow traffic; and as it did so, there flashed across John Masterson's uneasy mind a picture of his money. In that picture his money grew—grew always—grew as some noxious weed in a fair garden. He tried to hack away the weed, to uproot it. But always the weed spread, choking the garden-flowers. And at the root of that

weed coiled a snake—a little snake of suspicion that hissed. "What if she *would* marry you—just for your money?"

That snake of suspicion, he managed to cast from his mind; but the allegorical picture of his wealth remained with him. Wasn't he ever going to escape from wealth, to return—a free man—to the wider spaces, to the untrammelling plains and the untrammelling sea?

The car quickened speed; slowed again; drew up—its windows still dripping—under the portico of Carlton House Terrace; and as Rogers jumped from the box to ring one of the gigantic bells, as the double doors opened and the blank face of his head footman appeared in the opening of them, John Masterson remembered his yacht.

In three weeks, in a month at the latest, his yacht, *Minotaur*, could be made ready for sea. Supposing he took that line of retreat from passion!

And the sea-urge strengthened as he passed into his home. The very pictures in his hall seemed calling to him, telling him to escape—if only for a few short weeks—from this man-stifling London, from the problem of his love, and the problem of his wealth, and all those other minor problems which were harassing his brain. But the sea-urge, and all other urges with it, disappeared in sheer annoyance when, just as he was about to enter his smoking-room, the head footman came after him, saying:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I forgot to tell you that Miss Euphemia is in the drawing-room. There is a young lady with Miss Euphemia, sir; and Miss Euphemia sent down a message—some while ago now, sir—to say that if you came in before the young lady left, would you please go up."

"Very well, Adams. Very well."

As Masterson, restraining the impulse to vent his annoyance on the innocent menial; turned back and walked slowly up the vast staircase, he experienced no curiosity to discover either the identity of Euphemia's guest or why Euphemia should have sent for him. Even when he opened the stupendous doors of his Jack-the-Giant-Killerish drawing-room, and, peering across it, perceived his aunt's companion to be Mary Millward, the perception occasioned him no surprise. Because life, on this particular afternoon, had already furnished him with too big a surprise for such a little one to count.

Mary Millward rose as he joined them by the fireplace; but did not offer to shake hands. It struck him that her manner seemed a trifle awkward; and that her eyes—as he exchanged a few conventional words with her—looked anxiously towards

Euphemia. Then, before either of them had time to seat themselves, his aunt began to speak.

"When I got back from my drive this afternoon," began his aunt, "I found Miss Millward in the hall, talking to that idiot Adams. Fortunately, I recognized her at once. Miss Millward, I understand, has been trying for some time to dispose of her father's business, and having now done so, wishes to obtain a situation. She had intended writing to you, but finding herself in London—I gather she had to come up to London so as to complete the sale of the business—she thought that you might see her if she called. Apparently, John, on your last visit to Mastersleigh, you made some suggestion—— "

"Not exactly a suggestion, Miss Masterson," interrupted a diffident Mary Millward.

"Some suggestion," went on Euphemia, brushing aside the interruption, "that *you* might be able to find her employment. That is so, isn't it, John?"

"Quite so," nodded Masterson; and asked Mary to sit down.

Mary sat down on the edge of her chair; and his aunt, eyeing them both, resumed her discourse thus:

"I don't pretend to know anything about *your* work, John. But, as I'm always telling you, it's high time *I* had help with mine. So I've arranged with Miss Millward, subject, of course"—the blue eyes behind the old lady's spectacles might have displayed, to a more interested observer, somewhat less resolution than the old lady's voice—"to your full approval, that she should come to us as what is called, I believe, a secretary-housekeeper. We really do need a secretary-housekeeper, you know, John. These servants . . . "

Euphemia, once launched on the subject of servants, talked on for five full minutes; and by the end of that time Masterson had made up his mind. "It's rather luck," he decided. "Euphemia's housekeeping won't take up a quarter of her time. Most of the day she'll be free to work on that Humblestone Street job for me."

"And how much have you arranged to pay Miss Millward?" he asked, at a sudden pause in his aunt's monologue.

"I," Euphemia hesitated, "we hadn't quite decided that yet, John. Naturally I want Miss Millward to live here. But, of course, if we have to keep her, it makes all the difference to her salary; and that's why, personally—though it's for you to decide—I do think that a hundred a year is ample. After all—— "

"But, Miss Masterson, I can't—I really can't come for that."

This time, though there was anxiety, there was no diffidence

in Mary Millward's interruption. Nor, this time, did Euphemia brush the interruption aside.

"But why can't you come for that?" she asked; and now, in her turn, Mary Millward hesitated.

"It's because of Mother," she faltered, her eyes on Masterson; and went on, in the old forthright way, "I thought I could get two thousand for the business. But it didn't come off. I only got fifteen hundred—and I shall need nearly all that to pay off the Bank. So that, except for what I shall be able to allow her—and I shan't be able to allow her *everything* I earn, shall I?—Mother will have nothing of her own."

To which John Masterson, equally forthright, at once replied, "If you will tell us how much you require, Miss Millward, I've no doubt we shall be able to pay it"; and—having settled that his secretary-housekeeper should have exactly double the amount suggested by Euphemia—left the two women to arrange the rest of the matter alone.

For to John Masterson, on that particular afternoon when Mary Millward first agreed to enter his service, the entire matter—as the thoughtful student of that great tragi-comedy, Human Life will no doubt realize—appeared the most trivial of trivialities, hardly more important than his purchase of Peter the Great.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

§ 1

In the week that followed The Animal's run-away win at Sandown it seemed to John Masterson that life was one long round of nerve-fretting annoyances.

Adrian Rose, by now at work on the first act of the new play, ringing up to suggest that Ivor Carslake might take over ("Just for the next three months, old chap") the book-keeping work and the bank-accounts of the Fellowship, found it needed all his tact to get the suggestion adopted. While Frankie Farrar—answering at length about the Abyssinian hospital—was told, in three lines, to "hang the thing up till further orders": and Somerset House officials, demanding a second instalment of the death duties; Haringford, requesting a conference about the trust fund; Rogers, who wished to engage yet another under-chauffeur; Withers, who wanted brood-mares; Mrs. Arbuthnot, who wanted linen, and Keeper Hockey, who wanted wood-cutters—all received equally terse, equally procrastinating replies. Even Humblestone Street, indeed—throughout those seven days—failed to arouse more than a perfunctory interest. Because—all through those seven days—John Masterson's urge was the sea-urge, and his temper as the brooding temper of the storm.

Constantly—love and passion alike commanding—he tried to consider the problem of his future relations with Irene Carslake. Constantly—passion and love alike forbidding—his mind, asked to function reasonably, refused all reasonable function. Each time he re-met the girl—once alone in Bond Street, once outside Carlton House Terrace in the company of her brother, and once walking in the Park with Cynthia and Rupert Starleigh—he found himself more tongue-tied, more resolute for escape. He felt that he *had* to escape—from her, from London, from each and every oppressive triviality in his existence.

And of course—passion being what it is—all through that

week John Masterson's nights were the complement of John Masterson's days. If he slept, he slept dreamfully, his mind picturing now the girl, now his yacht, now Humblestone Street and now Addis Ababa, now this worry and now that.

But mostly, sleep stood away from him till the small hours; and on the last night of the seven it stood away altogether: till, having tossed wakefully and wakefully and always more wakefully, he heard Big Ben strike four, and, unable to bear with himself any longer, roused the Martinet from the foot of his bed, donned the old home-spun suit and the old shooting boots in which he had made his first appearance in London, and picked his way, dog at heel, down the vast staircase of his still slumbering house, to unbolt his own front door and tramp the Embankment, while dawn came redly under the railway-bridges and the ragged bundles on the riverside benches stirred never a muscle for fear lest they should re-awake to that misery which—for them, too—was Human Life.

§ 2

Perhaps—life being what it is, a constant impingement of other people's lives on one's own—it was the sight of those ragged bundles of humanity on the Thames Embankment, which calmed the main turmoil of Masterson's nerves, and forced him to avoid that greatest of all human vices, self-pity. Perhaps—on the other hand—it was the arrival of Mary Millward.

Somehow, the woman's presence in his house soothed him. Somehow—and from the very outset—her remarkable efficiency had its effect upon his mind. For she, too—quiet, careful, orderly, tackling first this job and then that, learning, all through those first days of her secretaryship, each and every detail of the curiously intricate machine which is Inherited Wealth—was of the silent breed, neither giving confidences, nor asking them, but just slipping into his life as noiselessly as a well-changed gear-wheel slips into its fellow.

It pleased him to realize that this woman seemed happy; that a little of her super-seriousness had disappeared; that occasionally she laughed as he remembered her laughing in the old times before she had taken over her father's business. And it pleased him, too, that Euphemia should like her, and Ivor, and Lonsdale; that Aubreystone—calling with new specifications—should defer to her practical knowledge; that Carfax should find her "quick" and Haringford "capable." Nor

did it surprise him when Rose—introduced to her for the first time—decided her to be "distinctly attractive."

She *was* attractive—this healthy, workaday creature with the gold hair and the blue eyes and the fine figure who brought, into the musty atmosphere of his gloomy house, something of the country, something of the sun. And once, watching her as she bent—concentration in every line of her face—over the big ledgers in the outside office, there came to him a memory of his other, earlier love-dream, and with it a mood impossible to analyze, a mood carrying a vast depression in its wake.

And after that the sea-urge renewed itself—desperately in all his being: so that it seemed to him as though he were caged, like the lions in the *Gebbi* at Addis Ababa: so that, acting on a sudden impulse, he ordered out the swiftest of his old cars, and, motoring to Portsmouth, commanded Captain Dunster, and Kennedy, his father's ancient sailing-master, to move Heaven and Earth and Cameron Nicholson's shipwrights to have the *Minotaur* ready for him within the next ten days.

§ 3

Meanwhile, however, another ship had arrived in harbour; and accordingly, on a certain sunny April morning—the morning of the twenty-fourth, says accuracy—the second post of the day brought to John Masterson, seated somewhat later than his wont at his enormous breakfast-table, a big envelope whose contents, scrawled in Cynthia Trevor's slap-dash hand on Cynthia Trevor's big blue notepaper, began with the announcement, "Tom got back from Morocco last Wednesday," and ended, "As he's so terribly keen to see you again, Irene and I both hope you will excuse short notice and come to dinner with us, quite quietly, almost *en famille*, to-morrow night."

Masterson's main emotion, as he read that apparently slap-dash epistle, was annoyance. He did not want to see Irene again—not, at any rate, until he came back from his cruise. It was no use seeing Irene again; no use renewing the whole gamut of tormenting sensations which had driven him sleepless.

On his way upstairs to the offices, he made up his mind to refuse the invitation; and might have done so there and then had it not been for Ivor, who greeted him, as he entered the first of the three rooms, with a confidential, "I've a special message for you, sir. From my sisters. They told me to tell you how disappointed they would both be if you couldn't see your way to dine with them to-morrow night."

Ivor's " both "—mere casual embroidery, because Irene had not even been in the house when Cynthia gave him the message—altered the whole issue.

" Would she really be disappointed ? " he asked himself when, having given the customary good morning to Mary Millward and Lonsdale, he retired through the red baize door to his private sanctum. " Would it hurt her if I refused ? "

The mental questions were not entirely unpleasant ; and, sitting down to his pipe, he allowed his mind to toy with them, till into his mind there sprang pictures of her ; of the lashes fluttering like black butterflies against the magnolia of her cheek, of her delicate hands, of her red mouth, of the tiny raven-dark peak the shingled hair made at her nape.

" That way," he thought, " lies madness." And again his determination was to refuse.

But in the end—deluding himself, " Ivor knows I haven't got any engagement for to-morrow, so that if I don't go it'll look as though I'm keeping away on purpose "—he plumped for acceptance ; and posted the acceptance with his own hand, thinking, as he turned on his heel and walked away from the decisive pillar-box, " Why shouldn't I see her just once more before I go away ? Why shouldn't I just dine there and say good-bye ? "

Yet that night, too, he slept as the passion-torn sleep, dreamfully, waking every hour to hear the wind rustling in the blinds, and the Martinet snoring as just dogs snore at the foot of his four-poster bed.

§ 4

Morning came in sunshine, and with morning a renewal of Masterson's self-control. But after he had lunched—a new habit this—at the Caxton ; after he had paid a necessary visit to one of his Banks, and walked in the Park for an hour, and come back to a solitary tea in the office, and read the early edition of the evening paper,and signed some letters which Mary Millward had typed for him, and gone across the landing—accompanied by the Martinet—to dress, his imagination grew so active that he found his fingers actually shaking a little as he stooped to unlace his boots.

" The Master has a touch of the fever," pronounced the observant Menelik—now in the nattiest of blue suits—as he knelt to assist the operation.

" The Master has nothing of the sort," said the inwardly furious Masterson.

All the same, his imagination continued active; and once Menelik had been dismissed; once he stood, his hands still not quite steady as they sought to adjust a clumsily knotted tie, before the full-length mahogany mirror which flanked his gigantic wardrobe, two futures flashed before his mind.

In the one future, he saw himself aboard the *Minotaur*, steaming away from Irene, steaming out of her life; steaming back into her life, cured of his passion, to resume a friendship—very precious to him, to her of little or no account—which might endure, with luck, until she fell in love and married. And in the second future, he also saw her married—but to himself.

That second future, though, was only a dream—a dear impossible dream. Even if, after long courtship, she might consent to marry him, it would not be fair of him to ask her in marriage. She was only a child, young as Rose's Lilian had been. (Strange, that he should think of Rose's Lilian!) And grown men, of forty, were no mates for children. In ten years, in twenty even, she would be at the zenith of her womanhood. Whereas, in twenty years, in ten even, he would be in his decline.

"So it can't be done," he decided, just as he had decided, nearly six months ago now, in Addis Ababa. "It simply can't be done."

§5

And that decision still seemed very definite to John Masterson when, dressing done, he patted the Martinet good-bye and issued from his bedroom.

Letting himself down in the lift, taking his hat and coat from Parker, stepping into his car, all the vacillations, all the doubts, all that conflict of conscious and subconscious emotion which had made the past weeks so nearly unbearable, appeared to have been smoothed away, and the compass of his brain set on having done with London—set for the sea.

For now, or so it seemed, the old longings were on him; and all the quick way to Sloane Street, the thought of the sea-spaces haunted him like a slave's dream of freedom. Almost, he could hear the hiss of his steam-winches as the anchor-chain rattled inboard, and the first beat of his engines, and the first slow thresh of the screw. Almost, he could see the white cliffs of England sinking astern—and, ahead, clear ahead beyond the arch of sunshine, the green floor opening foam-flecked to meet his steadfast bow.

But the sea-vision began to dim as his wheels made Sloane

Street. Summer-time had just come in; and the last of the April sunshine still lingered, regretfully, about the foliaged gardens. Lilacs were out—mauve and white—above the railings. His nostrils gave him the clean perfume of them as—the yellow door opening to his chauffeur's ring—he stepped from the car.

"You're a little early, sir," said the smiling parlour-maid; "I'm afraid Mrs. Trevor isn't down yet."

The parlour-maid helped him off with his coat; took his hat; shewed him up to an empty drawing-room; closed the door on him; and left him to wait.

Waiting, his nostrils still gave him—through open windows—the perfume of lilac-buds. But now, with the lilac-scents mingled others—the scent of lilies from the four tall porcelain vases on the Louis Seize mantelpiece; the scent of roses from the big cut-glass bowl on the painted piano. There was a photograph on the piano—a silver-framed photograph of Irene in her Court dress. He wanted to take up the photograph, to take it in his hands. "Fool!" he said to himself. "Fool! She's not for you."

He walked away from the photograph; began to wander, almost as a caged animal wanders, up and down the room. But the photograph still drew his eyes; and now, in his inmost mind, was another saying.

"A fool," ran that saying, "but a fool to go away."

A minute passed; two minutes; three minutes. Then he heard feet moving on the floor above; then voices, the rustle of embroidery on the staircase. And then—almost before he had time to wrench his eyes from the photograph—the door opened and she came in to him, alone.

She gave him greeting, the softness of her hand, a smile from her lips. She made him sit down; found cigarettes; offered him one; and when he refused, seated herself opposite to him by the fern-decorated fireplace.

"Didn't Cynthie tell you dinner wasn't till half-past eight?" she asked.

"No. I'm sorry if I'm too early."

Nervous, he could not see that she was equally nervous; that, even before she came in to him, every fibre in her body had begun to quiver; that, now, every nerve cell in her brain was an unanswered question—a question half of love and half of desire. For ever since that day at Sandown Irene had been thinking about this man, dreaming dreams about him—and those dreams had been strangely troublesome, yet always wonderful to her.

She was angry, too—angry with a strange, hurt, sullen anger

which yearned to hurt in return. "Why has he kept away so long?" asked her anger. "Why is he being so stiff? Doesn't he like me any more? Don't I look nice? Doesn't this picture frock suit me?"

But of all these thoughts Irene's young face shewed scarcely a sign; and as she began talking, trivially of trivial things, it appeared to John Masterson that even their old camaraderie had gone from them, even her old friendship been withdrawn.

She went on talking; and all the while he knew himself adoring her—hopelessly as men adore lost causes; and all the while he could hear the voice of his inmost mind saying, "A fool! A fool to go away."

To-night—it seemed to him—her loveliness was as the loveliness of all the flowers. How then could he bring himself to abandon that loveliness—to leave those flowers for other hands to cull—to leave them and go down to the sea? And yet, how could he do otherwise, seeing that she did not care for him, that she was only a child?

"Tell me," she asked—and he could not see how she was hating herself for the inanity of the question—"what have you been doing with yourself since we last met?"

"Oh, nothing much, Miss Carslake."

"How dull of you."

Irene fell silent, the strange anger biting like a sword at her either breast; and watching her, it came to John Masterson that it were best to make an end of this thing—at once—before the last remnant of his courage failed.

"I went down to Portsmouth the other day," he began.

"Did you?" Almost there was a sneer in her voice.

"Yes. To see about my yacht. About the *Minotaur*, you know. She'll probably be in commission by the end of the week."

"By the end of the week!" Suddenly, fear, ousting anger, came in upon Irene Carslake. "Then—then you're going away?"

"Yes."

Now silence fell on them both; and as that silence lengthened —lengthened and lengthened till every tick of the little clock on Cynthia's silver table seemed the last clock-tick of all—John Masterson's decision wavered as a compass needle wavers in the storm. He loved this girl—loved only her. He wanted this girl—wanted her for his wife. The very voice of her was temptation—temptation that set the heart hammering between his ribs. Yet his inhibitions still held; and, after a long while, stumblingly, he repeated himself.

"Yes. I'm going away, Miss Carslake."

"For how long, Mr. Masterson?"

"I—I don't know."

And at those words—suddenly as fear had come to Irene Carslake—came despair. For now, blindingly, it seemed to her that she knew the meaning of all her dreams; knew that she loved this man, that he must not leave her, must not go away. How could she let him go away, seeing the thing which she had done—and surely for his sake—only last night?

"But you must know how long you're going away for," she faltered, forcing her lips to a smile.

"I—I really don't."

Again silence lengthened between them—lengthened and lengthened in that flower-scented room; and in that silence she was aware, sharply as of a picture, of the thing she had done (and surely for this one man's sake) last night—of Rupert's face, livid with thwarted passion, of the great vein throbbing at Rupert's forehead as she told him, wresting herself from his arms, "No. No. I won't any more, Rupert. It's all beastly—and I won't." Was she sorry—now—now that all her dreams were dying—that she had done that thing? Would she go back, now, to the half-love—she who wanted the better love—the love that only a man such as this could give?

At last, still silent, she rose from her chair; and as he too rose, it seemed to John Masterson that his task was done. Her face had averted itself from him. One white hand played, idly, with the scented lilies. One scarlet shoe tapped, idly, at the marble kerb. "She doesn't care," he thought. And in that thought—for all the pain of it—was joy. Not for nothing had he immolated himself on the altar of her rose-white youth. Not for nothing had he sacrificed the heart of his desire.

"I've done right," went on his thoughts. "She couldn't care—because she is only a child."

And then, slowly, her face turned to him, and, looking on it, temptation harried him anew. She was all temptation, this child who—all on a sudden—seemed half the woman; this woman who—all on a sudden—seemed no longer child. She looked so lovely—so utterly and adorably lovely—standing there, her lips half parted—close to him—so close that one little movement could make her his. Couldn't he make her his, this child-woman whose tiny hands were whiter than the lilies, whose neck was milk-white, whose mouth was scarlet for the kisses of a man's desire?

He loved this child-woman; loved her with his whole body and with his whole soul. He wanted her—for his wife—for the

mother of his children. The very perfume that emanated from her maddened him—maddened him like strong wine. The very nearness of her stopped his heart-beats—robbed him of every function except the function of his eyes.

His eyes saw her through a mist—even through that rose-red mist of passion which blinds man to the truth. She was all a wonder to him—all the wonder and the splendour of great poetry—all the wonder and the splendour of earth's untrodden spaces, all the wonder and the splendour of the virgin sea. All girlhood's innocence seemed hers; and yet—strangely—all the lure of budding womanhood summoning its mate.

For now before Irene's eyes, too, swayed the mist—even that rose-red mist of passion which blinds woman to the truth; and through that mist her eyes called to him—called to him that he should make her his.

And now, all on a sudden, John Masterson's eyes read a little of the message that hers would send; and even as they did so, passion, burning up the inhibitions, had its way with him, so that his feet moved him to where she stood, and his arms opened, and, catching all her loveliness in his arms, he stammered, hoarsely, hardly knowing what he said or did: "Irene—Irene—I want you—be mine."

PART TWO

CHAPTER NINETEEN

§ 1

IRENE had been his since June. Now it was August. And to John Masterson, waiting for her—at half-past ten o'clock of a doubtful morning—under the apple-trees of Deauville's Hôtel Normandy, it still seemed as though no marriage in the world had ever been quite so wonderful as his own.

Half-past ten is early morning for Deauville; and as yet, except for a few waiters pottering in and out among the little white tables, he had the courtyard to himself. The solitude, the sweet-smelling coolness of the place, suited his introspective mood; and, lighting a pipe, he began to re-live their first engagement day; the days they had spent with her father and mother at Lostwithiel; and all those other engagement-days which had rushed by them till that crowning hour when the Church had made her his.

"She shall be happy," he had sworn to himself all through that crowning hour—and the same oath was in his heart to-day.

A little cloud blew across the sun. The leaves of the apple-trees rustled. A tablecloth flapped, oversetting a glass. From one of the gables above his head came the voice of a French-woman rating her maid.

But Masterson dreamed on—of their first week at Mastersleigh, of their weeks together on the *Minotaur*. How delicious had been those weeks! How exquisite was this young wife of his! What a debt he owed her—he who had never done anything, only love her, to deserve her adorableness!

The little cloud blew clear from across the sun; and, glancing up, he saw her coming towards him. She was all in white that morning, faultless as a Tanagra, laughter on her scarlet lips, laughter in her sea-green eyes. Looking into those eyes as she joined him at the table, he marvelled anew at his own good fortune; could hardly bring himself to believe that this perfect creature was really his wife.

Always, that belief had been a little difficult; and to-day, it seemed doubly so: because to-day—perhaps for the first time—he was conscious that this Irene was no longer quite the Irene of their wedding-hour; that the honeymoon weeks had changed her a little, making her even more delicious, even more compelling in her allurement.

Nor was John Masterson the only one to perceive the allurement in this new Irene. It was patent—while she sat talking with him under the apple-trees—to each and every person who came dawdling into the courtyard; to the short-skirted red-handed English girl with the tennis racquet under her arm; to the crinkle-haired boy in the wide biscuit-coloured trousers and university blazer who accompanied her; to the spectacled American and to the eye-glassed Scot; to the French courtesan who went slowly towards the hairdresser's, and to the two fierce-looking old Spaniards who went quickly towards their *apéritifs*.

Each and all of these people, and many more, absorbed though they were in their own separate pleasure businesses, could not help sending, as they passed Masterson's table, an occasional glance in the direction of Masterson's wife. Somehow, even in Deauville, this woman drew their eyes. Somehow, even to her fellow women, she radiated an aura of charm, of attraction, an aura difficult to define—sexless, yet all of sex.

But of that aura Irene herself had as yet no precise consciousness. To herself she was still the bride.

Yet even so, an occasional glance would penetrate, pleasing her by its testimony that this particular little world of cosmopolitan society found her not unattractive, found her not unworthy to be John Masterson's wife.

Another little cloud blew across the sun; and just for a moment, to the blowing of it, the tiniest cloud of doubting shewed in Irene's sea-green eyes. Was she worthy of this man? Was she making him happy? Was she herself happy? Hadn't there been moments—tiny yet unforgettable moments—of dissatisfaction, of self-mistrust?

But the very thought of those tiny moments seemed disloyal; and, once the sun shone again, she put introspection away, telling him, with a glance at the diamond watch—his latest present—on her wrist:

"It's time for our walk, John. Go and get your hat. I'll wait here."

Waiting; watching him re-emerge into the courtyard, she was all the bride again, love-conscious rather than passion-conscious; very proud of this big silent man whose rugged face

and rugged character contrasted so strangely with her own ; very thrilled to slip her arm through his as they went out through the white gates into that short narrow street which leads past the jeweller's shop to the tennis-courts and the sea.

" I love him," she thought, making him pause for a moment to inspect the winking trays in the jeweller's window. " I love him. Nothing else matters."

They left the jeweller's shop behind them ; and passed on, between red-roofed hotel and white-walled Casino, to the *plage*. The sun-lit *plage* was crowded with her acquaintances; and bowing here, smiling there, she rejoiced to feel herself courted, flattered, made much of in her capacity of bride.

So they came, across the car-crowded roadway, to the hedged sides of the tennis-courts ; and stood, her hand still on his arm, to watch the quick pageant of the game : so they walked on, slowly, past the thatched pavilion, till they reached the new bathing-houses, and the planks across the sand, and the little alfresco cocktail-bar and the sea.

The sea tossed—deep blue and foam-flecked—under a rising wind that kept all but the hardiest bathers close inshore ; and, wandering idly up and down the beach, they encountered yet more acquaintances—some gossiping under the vivid little porticoes of the bathing-houses, some strolling like themselves, some sitting here and there on canvas chairs in the sun.

After a while she bade him, too, find chairs, " a little away from the mob, so that we can talk." But when he had done so, there seemed no talk in her. Dreamful, it contented her to let her eyes roam.

Offshore, a league from the beach, the wave-line shewed jagged and a little menacing. Low on the horizon, gray cloud-banks hinted of storm. A cable's length from where they sat, three fishing-boats beat, close-reefed, for Trouville jetty. Beyond the jetty, a burnished steam-yacht nosed for the open, swinging out on a long starboard curve from the basins of Le Havre.

" We'll be doing that in another week," she said to herself ; and aloud, " John, it seems so funny to be rich, to have one's own yacht, and one's car, and a chauffeur, and a maid, and all these lovely pearls."

She fingered her pearls as she spoke ; and John Masterson, fascinated by the movement of her ungloved hand, could not restrain a smile of sheer joy at the thought that his money should be able to give her so much pleasure.

" You do like giving me things," she went on, noticing the smile. " Don't you ? "

"Rather!" admitted Masterson; and after that, silence fell on them again, till she said, her fingers still toying with the necklace:

"Darling, aren't we being frightfully extravagant? About Mastersleigh, I mean. Carlton House Terrace simply *had* to be done up. But Mastersleigh wasn't really necessary. And then all that new furniture I made you buy. Ought I to have made *you* buy it? Oughtn't I to have paid for some of the things out of —of my own money?"

At which hesitating reference to the marriage settlements, Masterson smiled again—and was still smiling, when a man's shadow fell across the sand at their feet, and, looking up, they saw Starleigh, who exclaimed:

"Well met. Well met, both of you. Only got here half an hour ago. It's a dog of a journey—poor Jill says she won't be fit to be seen till this evening. May I sit down?"

He shook hands and sat down, very much at his ease, on the sand; chatting on in the old way, while Irene, recovered from her first surprise at the unexpected meeting, watched him with thoughtful eyes.

It was quite extraordinary—she thought, watching this man —how little he had really counted in her life, how completely the past months had put even the memory of him away. And it was extraordinary, too, knowing him as she did, to think that he had behaved so well—no look, no word, not even a letter betraying the slightest anger at the news of her engagement, the slightest jealousy of the man who was his friend.

And yet, for all that he had behaved so well, for all that she had hardly an intimate memory of him, she could not help resenting—ever so vaguely, as Rupert picked up a handful of tiny pebbles and ran them idly through his long fingers—the fact that John *was* Rupert's friend.

"I wonder if I want them to go on being friends," she asked herself; and so asking also wondered—still vaguely—whether another girl would have confessed to John. Perhaps people when they were in love ought to confess their secrets to one another. Or perhaps they oughtn't to, because . . .

Oh, well, just because!

§ 2

All the same, after Rupert Starleigh, with a last, "Ta-ta, children. I'm glad to see you both looking so fit," had left them and disappeared, strolling a trifle more rapidly than usual, in

the direction of the tennis-courts, Irene Masterson's impulse was still towards some form of half-confession. If only John weren't quite so serious, quite so rigid in all his views! If only John weren't quite so fond of Rupert! If only she could find some way of hinting—perhaps to Rupert—that he oughtn't to go on being quite so friendly to John!

But in the end—telling herself that *l'affaire* Rupert belonged altogether to the past—she managed to quell the impulse, and all the short rest of that honeymoon morning, all through their rather silent lunch, all through that long storm-beaten afternoon when the new Lanchester limousine—her own property; Palethorpe, her own chauffeur, at the wheel—bore the two of them headlong through scudding wind and beating rain over the long gray roads of France, she vouchsafed scarcely a thought to the man who, wandering from *baccarat* table to *baccarat* table in Deauville Casino, kept telling himself, over and over and over again as he watched those many other women who had decked themselves for man's delight, that if he, John Masterson's stockbroker, did not keep a tight rein on his senses, he would soon be in love again—most hopelessly, most passionately and most inadvisedly in love—with John Masterson's wife.

CHAPTER TWENTY

§ 1

It was well past eight o'clock in the evening before Irene Masterson's new car came snoring back along Deauville *plage* to the Hôtel Normandy; and by that time a last cloud-burst had cleared all the sky; so that red sun-glints played among the rain-drops off the apple-trees, and the *concierge*, greeting her with a smile, made certain that the morrow would be fine.

But the wind was still blowing great guns from the sea; and as she let herself be undressed, slowly, revelling in the new luxury of her own maid, Irene could hear it thumping with strong hands at all the windows of their suite.

The exaltation of the storm suited some sudden exaltation in her mood; and after the sallow Swiss girl had finished undressing her, and she lay soaking in her perfumed bath, it seemed to her as though Nature's self were singing her epithalamium. And all the while she was being dressed—she chose green that night, a low-bosomed, puff-skirted frock of gold-slashed sea-green that almost matched the colour of her eyes—her exaltation grew. She, too, wanted to sing; to shout for sheer joy at being so loved and so alive.

Dressing over, she asked Coralie if she was looking her best; and when Coralie answered, "*Mais Madame est ravissante,*" felt all her vanity athrill.

"*Madame va visiter Monsieur,*" went on Coralie, hardly restraining a smile.

It was barely a week old, this habit of visiting John at his dressing; and as she made her way, daintily, across the narrow white-walled corridor which bisected their suite, Irene thought how pleasing it was; how all the more pleasing because it made him—despite his pleasure in it—the tiniest mite uncomfortable. He was such a man's man, this husband of hers, so unsophisticated, so obviously unversed in the ways of her own sex; and, entering his room, kissing him, amused to see him struggle first with his

stiff collar and then with his black tie, she caught herself marvelling that this should be so.

"Hasn't *he* any secrets?" she asked herself.

He finished his dressing; and kissing him again—flirting her eyes at him while he loaded his pockets with matches, with his keys, with small change, with a cigar-case, and the little gold knife she had given him and his bulging pocket-book—it seemed to her that Nature could not have found her a more unlikely mate.

But that thought, too, appeared the tiniest mite disloyal; and as they left the suite, she dismissed it, deciding, "That's why I love him; because he *is* so unlike me."

§ 2

On their way downstairs he told her of a letter he had had from Rose asking him to take the chair at the inaugural dinner of the Fellowship; and of another letter, from Aubreystone, about the effect of the building strike on his plans for Humblestone Street. His talk seemed out of place. To-night, she didn't want to hear about politics, about slum-betterment.

Once they were out of the hotel, however, and battling their way towards the Casino, the force of the wind reft all speech from them; and clinging to his arm as they made the lighted steps, she felt that she had never loved him so well.

"Want to try your luck?" he asked, as they came across the half-empty ball-room to the *boule* tables; and when she said she did, found a handful of francs; gave them to her and waited—with his usual patience—while she played away the lot.

Playing, leaving her play, making her way out of the ball-room into the restaurant, inquiring after their table from the *mâitre d'hôtel*, taking her seat, choosing their meal, she was again aware—and pleasurably—of the essential difference between them. This Deauville existence—this three o'clock in the morning existence of gambling and dancing—didn't really appeal to John. He only bore with it for her sake.

"Because he's so fond of me," she decided, letting her eyes rove about the restaurant.

From where they sat, the restaurant might have been a scene staged by a cinema director. Everywhere, lights glowed and women laughed and wine bubbled. At every table her eyes gave her some picture of wealth, of luxury, of enjoyment.

The bandsmen were playing, some soft unknown tune which seemed to her musical imagination as though it caressed her bared shoulders—caressed, with softly voluptuous caresses, the bared

shoulders of all those other women, with their bright eyes and their scarlet lips and their pearls and their diamonds and their gay frocks that put to shame the stiff shirt-fronts and the dark coats of the men.

How she loved this place! How the sights and the sounds and the perfumes of it intoxicated her senses. How she wished that John could love it, too. "I'll make him love it," she thought; and her eyes came back to him; sparkled at him as sun-glints sparkle under the sea.

"Cave-man!" she whispered. "Cave-man, I'm going to make you dance with me to-night."

He *was* a cave-man, this husband of hers. At least in some ways. These things, these civilized things which moved her so to rapture, moved him not a whit.

"Do you like dancing with me?" she went on.

"Rather," he said; and the solemnity of his answer warmed her to delight.

Her love-thoughts ceased to the ceasing of the music; and presently, after the *mâitre d'hôtel* had uncorked their wine and the waiters had begun to serve their meal, the people in her cinema-picture began to sort themselves, to assume—instead of being all of a pattern—their proper, and improper, identities.

She recognized a *soi-disant* English author, looking very much the foreigner with one play-actress and two key-chains; an old Army friend of her father's; a young Russian who had been introduced to her on the tennis-courts; Lady Miriam, wife of the banker, very imposing in scarlet velvet; a *mannequin* from her London dressmakers, very much better dressed than Lady Miriam; a thin woman in a *diamanté* frock whose name she had forgotten but who, she felt certain, had been at her wedding; Rupert with his sister, Jill; and lastly, sitting quite close to Rupert, another of their wedding-guests (and one of Cynthia's old flames) Bobbie Strut, the polo player.

Nearly all these people acknowledged her recognition; and she felt glad that this should be so, that she should be somebody, and not nobody, in this little world of luxury and fun. But Bobbie, though she smiled at him in the curious half-dignified, half-provocative manner she had acquired since her marriage, *would* look the other way; and after a closer glance at his table, she discovered his reason.

Bobbie Strut's reason was French. French—and *blonde cendrée*—and blue-eyed—and terribly attractive. Her pale hair was bob-shingled, the fringe cut low, after the new fashion, over a *gamine's* forehead. Black pearls, that put Irene's

own to shame, circled her slim throat. Half a dozen broad bracelets—onyx-and-diamond—emerald-and-ruby—banded each exquisite arm. While her dress—if dress it could be called—shewed, at that distance, as a mere triangular wisp of orange *georgette* caught up with an emerald clasp on the left shoulder.

And suddenly, watching that woman, there came to the young mind of Irene Masterson a burning curiosity to know everything about her life. She even tried to visualize that life; to make pictures of the lover who had first clasped those black pearls round that slim throat; of all those other lovers who had provided those emerald-and-ruby, those onyx-and-diamond bracelets. How many men, what kind of men had drowned thought in that *blonde cendrée* creature's kisses? How many passions had been hers? Or had she herself no passions? Was she just—just—what was Rupert's word—a love-machine?

It annoyed her, vaguely, that the woman should have made her think about Rupert; but the curiosity remained, and half way through dinner she pointed out the object of it to John, saying: "I can't take my eyes off her—she's so terribly attractive."

"Yes. She is attractive," he admitted, frowning. "At least she would be, if she weren't such bad form."

Seeing the frown, hearing the tone of his voice, she let the subject alone—finding herself, and for the first time, the tiniest atom afraid of his ingrained respectability. Hadn't Rupert once told her, in the very early days of their friendship: "My dear, if there's one thing love can't be, it's respectable"?

§ 3

Their dinner was over, dancing about to begin; but in the inmost consciousness of Irene Masterson, as she sat talking with her husband over their coffee cups and their cigarettes, that especial fear—that especial memory of the past—still endured. Nothing seemed to have quite driven them away; neither the wine she had drunk, nor the rich food, nor the wild music, nor even that ecstatic moment when the lights had dimmed and fireworks beyond the windows made all the restaurant sable golden with their golden rain. And now—allied with fear, allied with memory—there fell on her, just for one dreadful moment, depression.

"What's happening to me?" she asked herself. "Why am I being like this? I mustn't be. It isn't fair"; and in that mood —a mood all of contrition—she rose, and said, smiling at him:

" John, don't let's be too late to-night—I only want one little dance, one little gamble before we go home."

" Which first ? " he asked, as seriously as though it had been an important problem.

" Oh, the gamble."

He called for his bill, paid it ; handed her her bag, her gloves ; and, taking these things from him, she was aware that she didn't want to dance. She didn't even want to gamble. She wanted . . .

But those wants—bred of the wine she had drunk, and of the rich food and of the mad music—shamed her a little ; and presently, leading him out of the restaurant, through the guarded doorway of the Rooms, the gambler in her managed to forget.

At the brass-railed " millionaire's " table in the first and smallest of the rooms the game was even higher than usual. Insinuating her way through the crowd, she saw that Bobbie Strut's companion was holding the bank, and that there were more than five thousand louis already on the table. Lady Miriam had just called *banko*. Lady Miriam asked for cards. The woman with the black pearls flipped one from the shoe. Lady Miriam turned the card over and displayed an ace.

" *Je reste*," said the woman of the black pearls, her blue eyes expressionless. " *Quatre.*"

" *C'est bon, Madame.*"

After watching the Frenchwoman win yet another coup, Irene led John away, past the doors of the " Men's Room " (where there is no *cagnotte* and the banks open for twenty thousand) to the inner *salle*. Here the play was lower, friendlier. Acquaintances chaffed while they gambled. From the bar came the clink of glasses, laughter, the occasional voice of a man hurrying his drink.

" John," she pleaded. " Be an angel. Find me a seat."

The seat which John Masterson found for her happened —by sheerest accident—to be next to Rupert Starleigh ; and to Irene—her contrite mood not yet forgotten—the happening seemed a trifle ominous. " I'd ever so much rather not sit next to Rupert," she thought ; and so thinking very nearly decided to forego her gamble. Reflecting, however, she made up her mind that to do so might look " marked," and sat down to play.

Rupert, forewarned of her coming, greeted her with his usual equanimity ; and for a little while, settling herself in comfort, ordering a footstool from the attendant, arranging her *plaques* on the baize, turning to watch John take up his usual position behind her chair, she told herself that it was foolish to worry her head about so trifling a matter.

But almost the moment she started to play, the matter began to take on a different complexion.

Wasn't there something—something rather unpleasant about this public juxtaposition of Rupert and John? Didn't Rupert realize that it was just—just a little indecent that the other people at the table—his sister, Jill; the English woman in the *diamanté* frock; the quiet young Guardee in the black butterfly tie, and the two undistinguished French ladies either side of him—should witness her in the company of two men, one of whom was her husband and the other of whom had been . . .

"But that's positively childish," she told herself. "One can't help one's past."

Presently, winning a *plaque* here, losing a *plaque* there, she managed to control thought and concentrate on the game. After a time, however, thought came back; and when the *croupier* passed her the shoe, she could not help wondering again, as Rupert matched her ten louis, whether he, too, were finding this public juxtaposition of himself and John the tiniest bit indecent.

But Rupert Starleigh's gray eyes—though, passing him his cards, she scanned them as intently as she dared—gave her no hint whatsoever. Nor was his voice—though she listened to every modulation of it—a bit more illuminative than his eyes.

"What have we here?" he said; and then, throwing a six and a three face upwards on the table. "*Le neuf. Le gros numero neuf.* I always could play this game. Let's have the old shoe."

He raked in her *plaques;* took the shoe; dealt to his right; won; won again; went on winning. Vaguely, it annoyed her that he should win while she lost. Vaguely, she had the impulse to beat him if she could. And suddenly, she felt resentful of Rupert's very attitude. Why was Rupert so self-assured now? Why had he behaved so well when he heard of her engagement? Obviously, because he had never really cared for her; because his interest in her had only been—what was Cynthie's word?—experimental.

That favourite word of Cynthia's shocked her a little; but all the time that the shoe continued its slow way round the table, its significance nagged at her mind.

"Rupert only made love to me for an experiment," said the sudden resentment in her. "Just to see how I would take it. Just to see if I *would* keep my head"; and when the shoe came to her again, the impulse, no longer vague, to make him pay for his experiment by beating him at this game, renewed itself quite clearly in her irritated mind.

But that bank, too—though she quadrupled her stake and won the first *coup* of it—went down; and as she watched Rupert's steady hands making little piles of the counters which had been hers, she had to bite hard on her nether lip to prevent her voice betraying her annoyance.

He asked her if she would have half his bank; and when she refused—her voice cold, her toes curling in their stockings—put up fifty louis, remaining undefeated till the last cards were flipped from the shoe.

"Good for you, old man," said John.

The pleasure in John's voice set her thoughts dithering. What rotten luck it was that this man should be John's particular friend!

The *croupier* had re-made the packs. He was handing her the mass, the little card to cut the mass. Cutting, her thoughts continued to dither. The faces, the hands round the table seemed all of a blur. Only one face—Rupert's—could she see clearly: and only one hand—her own. Her own hand—as it slipped the little card into the mass—looked very white, very tiny. On it blazed John's sapphire—the great jewel he had given her for their engagement. Under the sapphire, hidden by it, was another ring—the ring John had given her on their wedding day. It seemed to her, suddenly, that the rings were symbolical; that it was because of them she must beat Rupert at the game.

The *croupier* took the cards, re-arranged them in the shoe. Rupert put his bank up to auction. The woman in the *diamanté* frock bought it. Irene's sight cleared. Her thoughts ceased their dithering. Calm now, with that funny frozen calmness which always came to her in a crisis, it seemed to her that she must have more money—heaps and heaps more money.

John, asked for more money, laughed at her and handed over his notecase. She opened his notecase; counted out ten thousand francs; handed the case back; and said, noticing the look of surprise on his rugged, good-tempered face: "Only on loan, darling; and I'm not going to lose it." For now, abruptly, she was experiencing the conviction—common to all good gamblers—that her luck had changed.

The *diamanté* woman's bought bank did not run. The shoe began to circle again; circled on till it reached the quiet young Guardsman; Jill; the undistinguished French lady on her own right.

"*Vingt louis,*" said the undistinguished French lady.

Irene went *banko*: lost; followed her *banko*: won; took the

shoe, and put up five of John's thousand franc notes against Rupert.

"As much as that?" asked Rupert, his eyebrows lifting.

"Why not?"

"As you say—why not."

He matched her stake, and for a second their eyes clashed—cold gray against colder green. As they did so, Irene felt that she hated him beyond all endurance.

His eyes averted themselves as she dealt the four cards; and waiting for him to speak, she experienced an almost crazy desire to hurt him, to humble him before John, and before all these other people who had witnessed her in his company.

"A card, please," he said. "That's to say if you're giving."

She took up her cards; looked at them; felt her heart give its first flutter of triumph; and put down an eight.

"Not this time," she told him. "But, of course, you can go on."

"Do you want me to?"

"It's for you to decide."

Again, their eyes clashed. Again, while his long hands counted out his notes, she was conscious of anger. But the anger did not affect her brain. She was still quite calm—no shake in her fingers as they dealt him his cards. She only wanted to teach him his lesson—to make him understand that she was not the sort of woman a man could make love to just to see how she would take it, for an experiment.

"Cards?" she asked.

"Please."

The card she turned him was a knave, useless against the six in her own hand; and this time, her voice, announcing her six, betrayed a tiny note of the triumph with which her heart was fluttering.

"I should give up this game if I were you, Rupert," she said, while the *croupier* was raking over the stakes and pushing his *cagnotte* money and ticket into the slot; "and go back to stock-broking."

And at that, in Rupert Starleigh also, there stirred anger. Ever since morning he had been thinking of the new allurement in this woman; desiring it; vowing—for his friend's sake—to put an end to his desire. Why, then, should fate have brought it to his side—brought this new Irene here—here, to remind him of the old Irene; to tantalise him; to madden him with her eyes, with her lips, with her skin, with the perfume of her hair?

"We'll see about that," he said, forcing a smile.

Recklessly he began to marshal the last of his money against hers. Recklessly—his thoughts almost visible in his gray eyes—he watched her while she dealt. And now, in her eyes, also, was a recklessness, a message so visible that, just for a moment, he feared lest her husband should understand. Then her eyes averted themselves; and he turned to his cards.

His cards—a four and an ace—made him hesitate; and hesitating, listening to her calm, "I'm giving if you want one," it seemed to him as though the moment were pregnant with all the destinies. "She mustn't beat me," ran his thoughts. "Not even at this game."

"Well," she repeated. "Well, Rupert, do you want a card?"

"No," he said—and this time his lips could hardly force the smile. "No. I do not."

"All right."

She turned over her own cards, and he saw, his heart beating, that she, too, held five—a deuce and a three; that she, too, was hesitant.

"What do I do?" she asked.

"*Vous tirez, Madame,*" answered the *croupier.*

So she drew; and the drawn card was a three; and hearing the polite mockery in her, "That makes eight, Rupert. Hadn't you better take my advice and go back to stockbroking?" he felt that he hated her as he had never hated woman before.

§ 4

She had beaten Rupert Starleigh, beaten him out of twenty thousand francs; taught him, in this strange subterranean manner she felt certain his strange subterranean mind would understand, that she was not the kind of woman a man could make love to for the sake of the experiment; and now, as she watched him rise—seething with a resentment he dare not express—it seemed to John Masterson's wife that all memories of the past and all fear for the future had been forever exorcised from her inmost consciousness.

Once more—as she, too, rose—the exaltation of the storm was upon her. Once more—as she sat alone with John at one of the little marble-topped tables of the bar—those wants, bred of the wine she had drunk, and of the rich food, and of the mad music, resurged to fever in all her veins.

"I—I'd like some more wine," she said suddenly. "Can't we have just half a bottle before—before we dance?"

He called for more wine; and sipping it, giving him back his

ten thousand francs, she thought: "How big he is—and how strong! How I love him! What a beast I've been all day—letting myself be disloyal to him, dissatisfied with him."

She finished her wine; led him out of the rooms, back into the restaurant; led him on to the floor; danced with him, laughing a little at his clumsiness, till the very contact of their dancing bodies seemed intolerable, a pleasure hardly to be borne. Then—laughing no longer—she led him away, out of the Casino, out on to the terrace, out into the night.

It seemed to her as they stood upon the terrace, that all the night was a great cave for their passion—one great moon-shimmering star-dusted love-cave loud and loud with the clangours of the sea. And it seemed to her, as they came down from the terrace between glittering car-lights towards the Normandy, that she wanted him to possess her in that love-cave, to take her to him under the moon-shimmer and possess her by the clangours of the sea. And it seemed to her—that night, as she waited for him in their bedroom at the Normandy—that she could no more be satiate of this their passion than the moon could be satiate with the passions of the sea.

But to John Masterson—that night, when she whispered, vibrant-voiced and vibrant-bodied, every nerve in her a-tremble with emotions his own emotions could neither comply with nor understand, "John—John—I adore you—you only—kiss me—kiss me—and again"—it seemed that she was still the child-woman, almost innocent of passion, virgin as the virgin moon-beams, and cleaner than the sea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

§ 1

It was the twenty-fifth day of September, only a month since they had left Deauville, only a fortnight since the docking of the *Minotaur* and their return to Carlton House Terrace. And yet already in the mind of John Masterson—perpending his Irene as she sat deep in converse with Euphemia by one of the new fireplaces in their re-decorated drawing-room—there dawned a doubt, not of his own happiness but of hers.

Lounging at his ease—the Martinet watching him—on the big cretonne-covered sofa under the netted windows, letting his eyes range curiously all about the new slightly Frenchified comfort of this vast apartment, every physical and every mental instinct assured him of his own well-being.

But what of Irene's? Wasn't she a little young for wife-hood, he a little old to be her husband? Hadn't there been, every now and then, moments when he failed to understand her; when the barque of their mutual happiness struck fog, or squall? Or were such petty disagreements as they had had inseparable from matrimony, part of the price that every man and woman must pay for their home?

"The petty things oughtn't to count," he told himself, remembering their first quarrel—an absurd affair as to whether the *Minotaur* should leave Deauville in the morning or the afternoon. "Nothing ought to count except love."

For there was so much to love in this girl-wife he had chosen. Every day revealed some fresh charm in her, some unexpected quality of heart or brains.

She was using her brains now, pitting them against Euphemia's; and, watching the pair of them at their argument, watching Irene's white forehead knit, watching Irene's fingers stabbing home each point till the lace-capped white curls of his old aunt shook grudging acquiescence, he forgot doubt in sheer admiration for her forthrightness, for her speed in decision.

"She doesn't reason things out," he decided. "She doesn't weigh costs, consequences, opposition. She just goes for her point, makes it, and goes on to the next. That's youth—bless it."

And from that, his hand reaching down to pat the Martinet's head, he relapsed into a medley of day-dreams; seeing her already the mother; seeing her young with her sons, with those strong sons who should carry all before them at Eton, and at Oxford, and in the wider worlds of politics or soldiering or the law. Till presently—his day-dreams deepening—it needed a sharpish word from Euphemia to recall him to the material present.

"John!" Euphemia was saying. "John, I do wish you'd listen. Irene says we ought to pension Ellison off."

"Really!"

"Yes—really." Irene's words, too, held something of sharpness. "To begin with, because he's too old; and to go on with because people's don't keep majordomos nowadays. They're anachronisms."

"Anachronism or no anachronism"—the plates rattled in Euphemia's mouth—"*I* shouldn't feel comfortable without Ellison."

"Oh, yes, you would, Aunt." Irene, smiling, changed her tactics. "*I'd* see to that."

She got her own way, of course—she always did get her own way—and after she had got it, after she had escorted the old lady to her own floor and returned to her husband, continued smiling.

"*You* won't like getting rid of Ellison," she said, seating herself beside him on the sofa. "And I've got something worse to break to you. Parker'll have to go too!"

"Also with a pension?"

"No! Certainly not. Parker's a thief, John. He steals your wine."

"But I say"—Masterson shook off the usual lethargy which always affected him during such discussions—"you can't do that. Sack the man out of hand, I mean. After all, he's been here more than twenty years, and you've no proof——"

"Proof!" Irene's smile vanished. "One doesn't need proof with servants. One *knows*."

"You can't just know that a man's a thief. You've got to have evidence."

"I don't want evidence. I only want Parker got rid of. You can pension him, too, if you insist."

"All right, my dear. Have it your own way."

Masterson—still a little muzzy with his day-dreams—yielded without further struggle. All the same, the incident left its sting; and presently, half to himself and half-aloud, he said, "Do you know, in many ways you're rather a startling person?"

"Why?" Irene rose as she spoke; lounged half across the room; fingered one of her new treasures—a little ivory statuette; and lounged slowly back again. "Just because I don't like people to steal from us?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then why am I startling? Is it because I know what I want and get it? I believe that is the reason. You see, John"—she was close to him now, her green eyes all appraisal—"you never know what *you* want. Not in the little things of life. And the little things of life are so frightfully important."

"Are they?" Masterson spoke slowly.

"My dear, of course they are. Take this dinner to-night! I should simply hate it if you weren't going to be in the chair. You see"—now she, too, spoke slowly, fumbling for her words—"if you weren't in the chair, we might not be at the top table. And I like being at the top table. *Everywhere.* John, you don't think any worse of me for saying that, do you? You don't expect me to see eye to eye with you about everything?"

"Of course not."

"Darling!"

She re-seated herself, fondled one of his arms. The directness of her endearment, the very proximity of her, fretted him a little. His love for this young and lovely creature needed no catechism. Couldn't she take his love for granted, as he took hers?

But the tiny man-like mood of annoyance with her lasted only a second; and almost immediately conversation took an easier turn, held it till Coralie—tapping on the door—warned her she must be dressing for dinner.

§ 2

This transformed house of his still seemed fairly strange to our friend, John Masterson; and as—a few minutes later—he made his way out of the drawing-room and over the new pale-blue carpets along the white-panelled landing with its bronze bracket lights, he paused for a moment at the open door of Irene's boudoir.

The boudoir was still in the hands of the decorators; but

peering in, switching on the cornice lights, he saw that another twenty-four hours would finish the job. "And a good job it'll be, too," he decided, examining the pale cedar walls, the music-daïs, the groined ceiling, and the big stone fireplace with its shining dogs. "Aubreystone's made no mistake over this."

Pleased, he switched off the light; made his way to the new lift-gates; thought better of taking the lift; and went on afoot up the staircase till he came to the floor above. And there, also, he paused—looking about him, trying to recollect what this particular place had been like in the past.

The past, however, eluded him. Part of the big double bedroom he shared with Irene had, of course, been his mother's. But the extra space, and the two bath-rooms adjoining, and his own dressing-room beyond, seemed to have been conjured out of the walls.

"Clever," thought Masterson, again referring to Aubreystone. "Devilish clever."

All the same, as he passed on again, up the narrowing staircase to the floor occupied by Euphemia and Mary Millward, as he conjured up, from the rather hotel-like vision which now presented itself, a picture of the day-nurseries and the night-nurseries and the big school-room where he and his brothers had played and slept and had their beings more than a quarter of a century ago, the Englishman and the sentimentalist in him were alike resentful of the fact that all things, even houses, change.

"Pity!" he thought. "Pity! I'd like *my* kids to have had that old rocking-horse, that old wall-paper."

And by the time he reached the fourth floor and his offices, the sentimentalist in him had so far got the upper hand that he caught himself positively rejoicing at Irene's sudden fit of economy which—to Aubreystone's annoyance—had prevented him from carrying his transformation any higher.

For here, nothing had altered; neither the frayed Axminster under his feet; nor the hideous electrolier above his head, nor even the scratches which Martinet's impatient puppy-claws had made on his bedroom door.

That bedroom, of course, was no longer his. The office—he imagined—used it as an extra store. Funny—when one came to think of it—that the bedroom where his father had slept out his widowerhood should be used as a store.

But Masterson, ever since the discovery of Humblestone Street, had never been able to think overmuch about his father; and after a moment or so, frowning a little, he put thought away, and passed through the red-baize door into his offices.

In the first of the three office-rooms—which Ivor shared with Lonsdale—work was obviously over. The one light under the green glass shade revealed closed desks, locked safes, shut inkpots and tidied papers. But from the second room, there still issued sound—the sound of Mary Millward's typewriter-bars clacking, of Mary's typewriter-bell signalling the end of a line.

"Not finished yet?" he asked, entering that second room.

Mary Millward did not turn her head at his entrance; nor—as she answered his question—did her capable hands cease their working on the keys. Yet sitting there—a picture of fair womanhood subordinated to efficient service—she was aware, and very distinctly, of emotion. She liked this big silent man; understood him . . .

But the picture his secretary made aroused no emotion in Masterson.

"What are you working at?" he went on.

"To-night's dinner list." Still, Mary's gold head did not turn.

"I thought Ivor was attending to that?"

"Mr. Carslake had to go home and dress. So I'm taking it on to him at the Hotel Victoria."

"You're going to the dinner yourself, then?"

"Oh, yes. Major Rose very kindly sent me a free ticket."

Passing through the last baize door to his own sanctum, sitting down at his desk, reading his letters, signing them, Masterson thought of Ivor. He had made a mistake in keeping on Ivor. Even the best of brothers-in-law would be the wrong man for secretary. And Ivor was always doing things like this, "darting off" as he called it, and leaving his work to be done by Lonsdale or Miss Millward. One couldn't tackle him about it, though—because of the relationship.

He looked at his letters again, added a postscript to Aubrey-stone, "I like what you've done here but wish that you'd get a move on in Humblestone Street"; and had just put down his pen, when Mary Millward came in.

"Major Rose told Mr. Carslake you were to see it," she said, spreading the dinner list on his desk. "This is the top table. You're in the centre, of course, with Mrs. Masterson on your right. Mrs. Rose can't come. She's got a bad cold."

"How many are we going to be, Miss Millward?" Masterson, scrutinising the list, spoke absent-mindedly.

"Nearly four hundred. Isn't it wonderful?"

Something in her voice, in her look, attracted his attention.

"You're keen on the Fellowship, then?" he went on.

"Rather. Things are in a bad way in this country, Mr. Masterson. And they're getting worse. I was in Humblestone Street once or twice while you were away; and heard people—foreigners—preach open revolution in the streets. That ought to be stopped. But it never will be stopped, under a Socialist Government."

The vehemence behind the words penetrated; and, looking at her again, Masterson realized—for the first time since she had entered his employment—that underneath the calm exterior of this woman there slumbered a totally different creature.

"I shouldn't take the Fellowship too seriously if I were you," he said.

"I don't, Mr. Masterson. But father was killed in 'eighteen.' While most of the men in the present Government were doing their best to encourage the enemy. So you can't expect me to trust the Socialists, can you?"

"Oh, come, the Socialists aren't as bad as all that."

"Aren't they?"

She stopped there, her eyes steel, her white hands clenching; and Masterson, though thoroughly intrigued, forbore to press her further. "Funny creatures, women," went his slow thoughts. "One never knows quite what they're driving at."

Tongue-tied now, Mary Millward took the dinner list from him, folded it and began to gather up his letters. As she did so, he remembered her relations with Tom. "Good thing she doesn't want to get married," went on his thoughts. "I don't know what *I'd* do without her."

And it may have been that last thought which prompted him to say—just as she was leaving the room, "Oh, by the way, as you're going to the dinner, you may just as well come in the car."

§ 3

Mary Millward, hurriedly casing her typewriter and preparing her employer's letters for the post, was again aware—not too pleasantly—of emotion. Somehow, she didn't want to go in the car. Somehow, she resented the calm way in which Masterson had taken her acceptance of his offer for granted. "I wish I *didn't* understand him," she thought. "I wish I didn't see, quite so clearly, what goes on in his mind." But of the processes at work in her own mind Mary Millward—as yet—saw nothing; and presently, dressing herself with her usual care, the emotion disappeared.

Meanwhile, however, Masterson—alone in his new dressing-

room—Menelik dismissed—continued to be intrigued about her.

" Wonder why she's so keen on politics," he thought, as he shaved himself at the silver-tapped basin in his new tiled bathroom. " Blowed if I am."

This speculation about his secretary deepened as he attired himself with his usual careless haste in his evening dress. The long bar of his medals—winking at him from the narrow mirror of his built-in wardrobe—recalled the War, the leave-day when she had given him tea at Lipstone. And after a while those medals brought back fuller memories—memories of this very day, nine years ago now, when he and his men had gone over, to the peal of the hunting-horn, from the trenches before Loos.

But that mood passed—swiftly as it had come in upon him—to Irene's entrance. She looked so lovely to-night—so gay, so bridal, that, kissing her, he forgot all the old days.

For though he was man's man, this, and a man predestined to the service of his fellows ; though to-night—after many months—the love of his fellows was again to stir in him, the rose-red mist of passion still curtained all his mind, and through it he could see only two scarlet lips and two sea-green eyes calling to him that he should give them happiness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

§ 1

THERE was no happiness, however, in the sea-green eyes of Irene Masterson when—just as they left his dressing-room—her husband turned to her with a casual, "Oh, by the way, dear, as Miss Millward's going to the dinner, I've told her we'll take her in the car." They flashed, did those eyes—flashed with a sudden irritability which—though it struck her as perfectly ridiculous—Irene found it almost impossible to repress. And once the lift had decanted them in the inner hall—white now, and dignified under its crystal chandelier—her sudden irritability found sudden tongue.

"I wish you'd consulted *me*," she began—but the footman, announcing Rogers and the Daimler at the door, prevented further conversation; nor—as Coralie helped her into the ruched white velvet opera-cloak, and handed her her long gloves, her bag and her big white ostrich-feather fan—did Masterson's obtuseness realize any of his wife's thoughts.

"The Millward woman's going to be late," ran those thoughts. "Dependents always get out of hand when one does them a favour. Besides—why should John do her this favour? Why should he want to do any woman a favour—except me?"

Nor did Mary Millward's appearance—though she arrived, according to inevitable habit, on the precise second of punctuality—do anything to alleviate that sudden irritability. Mary Millward's clothes, Mary Millward's figure, Mary Millward's conversation—all these, decided the wife of Mary Millward's employer, as her footman opened the new glass outer doors of her hall and escorted them under the carriage umbrella into her car, were completely out of place in a housekeeper-secretary.

And all the short way to the Hotel Victoria, she sat silent—flooded with unreasoning jealousy, telling herself that though this woman might be harmless enough, might even be a lady, she, Irene Masterson, did not propose to consort with her husband's dependents.

§ 2

Still silent, still prey to that unreasoning jealousy, Irene Masterson became aware that they had arrived at the hotel; that "the Millward woman" was thanking her for the "lift," and that she was acknowledging the thanks with a forced smile. Then, refusing to abandon her cloak, she found herself at the foot of the stairs leading down to the banqueting-room.

There, very impressive, his medals polished till they shone, his black eyes purposeful and a hint of excitement in his deep voice, stood Rose; who greeted her with outstretched hands, saying, "My dear Irene, you're a marvel of punctuality. How—and where—is John?"

"Brushing his hair, I hope, Adrian," she answered; and answering felt a little of her irritability subside.

"It's going to be a great evening," confided Rose, when John appeared; and continued, leading on into the big white reception-room, "We ought to get quite a show in the Press, too. With any luck."

He shewed them where they should stand to receive their guests; and presently—shaking hands now with one person and now with another—Irene began to enjoy herself. All these people—this old General, blazing with ball-room decorations; this shy young couple, obviously flurried at having arrived so early; this stern-faced spinster with the Q.A.I.M.N.S. order pinned slant-wise on her stiff dress; this breezy sailor-man; these young journalists; this muscular padre and all these others whose faces came blurring in on her to each loud announcement of their names—were going to hear John speak. And suddenly, she knew that she wanted John to speak well, to distinguish himself.

After a while, the main flood of arrivals ceased. After a while Cynthia appeared; and, following Cynthia, Cynthia's Tom; and following Cynthia's Tom, Jill Fernshaw with Rupert. To-night, somehow or other, the sight of Rupert stirred no resentment in her. She even exchanged a few sentences with him, priding herself, while she did so, on the aplomb with which she managed to carry off the situation.

"Hot, ain't it?" said Rupert.

By now it *was* hot, overpoweringly so, in the crowded reception-room; and Irene—giving him charge of her opera-cloak—demanded that he should procure her a cocktail.

Drinking that cocktail, she caught scraps of chatter: "Yes, that's Masterson—millionaire, you know—they say he's financing

the whole show" . . . "Have you ever heard Rose speak? I have—he's great" . . . "Yes—that was Masterson's wife—the one you shook hands with—*some* pearls—what!" . . . "Of course I belong to the Fascisti as well. Nothing like joining everything that's going, eh?"

And the chatter excited her: so that by the time Rose pushed his way to their side, saying, "That's about the lot, I think," and the usual stentorian: "Mr. Chairman, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, your dinner is served," ushered them to their meal, she had practically forgotten her annoyance.

§ 3

To your confirmed diner-out, nearly all public banquets divide themselves into two classes: the one, labelled "Evening dress," usually too stiff, and the other, labelled "Evening dress optional," usually too Bohemian, for real enjoyment. And to that confirmed diner-out, Rupert Starleigh, once he had listened to the usual two-word grace from the muscular clergyman and re-seated himself two places from its President on the left of Cynthia Trevor, the inaugural dinner of the Fellowship of Loyal Citizens fell promptly into the former category.

"Looks like being a damn dull show," he confided to Cynthia, as that bright-eyed lady addressed herself to the hors d'œuvres. "What's it all about? A feast to the honour and glory of our friend, Adrian Rose?"

"You know perfectly well it's nothing of the sort, Rupert. The Fellowship's *most* important; and if we have a General Election next month—as I'm told we're going to . . ."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, don't talk politics."

"Sulky brute, these days, aren't you, my dear. What's the matter? Been crossed in love?"

"No. In the American Market."

Cynthia Trevor, having delivered her little stab, averted a well-powdered cheek, leaving Starleigh, who could find nothing in common with the stern-faced spinster on his left, a prey to silent and evil-tempered ruminations, during which he cursed himself, once and yet again, for having been lured to this unnecessary function.

"No point in meeting her," cursed Rupert Starleigh. "Ought to keep out of her way. She's being deuced friendly, too. I wonder why."

The banquet progressed, after the habit of banquets, slowly. Waiters brought him foods; waiters brought him wines. But

neither the foods nor the wines seemed to have any taste. He ate of them, drank of them, mechanically. Every now and then, peering sideways along the table, he caught a glimpse of Irene's pale face, of her dark shingled hair and her laughing eyes.

But Irene, though her eyes laughed, had begun to find things a little dull. On her left, John, more silent even than his wont, obviously dreading his speech-making, seemed to have forgotten her for the study of his notes. On her right, a fussy old General —also on the Toast List—would relate, at interminable length, the whole history and the entire aims of "this Fellowship movement."

"Anybody who is *loyal*. You grasp the idea, Mrs. Masterson. We believe in political action; but we want to put some ginger into our politicians. These are serious times. Very serious times. And we *must* have the women of the country with us. Especially the young women. Our friend, Rose, is right about that. Absolutely right. The women of this country—especially the younger women—are splendid. I remember, when the big strike was on in Coventry, I had a *chauffeuse*——"

The General's memories of his *chauffeuse*—"and a devilish pretty girl she was, I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Masterson"—proved so interesting to him that they put a stop to his explanation of the Fellowship movement, outlasted the *sorbet*, outlasted the inevitable restaurant chicken and outlasted the sweet. But to Irene, they brought back—all disquietingly—the thought of Mary Millward.

"Men aren't the same as we are," she decided, listening to the prosaic words. "They *like* their inferiors. This old man 'took quite a fancy' to the girl who drove his car. Supposing that John were to 'take quite a fancy' to the woman who does his accounts. What should I do then? Flirt with Rupert again? How silly I'm being. I should hate to flirt with Rupert. And John's too respectable to take a fancy to anybody."

Then a tremendous rap on the table startled her in mid-thought; and almost before the toastmaster's stentorian announcement penetrated to her consciousness, John had risen to his feet, and was calling on her to toast the King.

Rising, toasting the King, her eyes caught Rupert's. "He's bored too," she realized. But the realization that she understood Rupert so much better than she understood John, shocked her a little; and, reseating herself, she put all thought of him away.

John gave the second of the loyal toasts. The General gave her a cigarette from his case. Looking sideways at John, she felt herself growing anxious. Once more, she wanted him to

speak well, to distinguish himself, to make a sensation. For the moment—instinct told her—was ripe for sensation. All about her, be-medalled men and decorated women sat eager. The reporters had taken out their pencils, their notebooks.

" Nervous ? " she asked him.

But John did not answer, only signalled to the toastmaster ; and—a moment later—rose to his feet.

§ 4 .

John Masterson's audience heard him out, not without enthusiasm, from the first halting, " Ladies and gentlemen, the toast which I now have to give you is the toast of this Fellowship to which we all belong," to the last, " And now I don't think that I can do better than make way for our President, Major Adrian Rose." But to John Masterson's wife the speech was one long disappointment. She had wanted fire from him, the real wine of oratory. Instead, he had given her . . . the plain water of everyday speech.

And once the toastmaster had announced, " Mr. Chairman, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, pray silence for your President, Major Adrian Rose, D.S.O., M.C.," something like sheer envy for Rose's Isobel entered into her soul.

This man, unlike her husband, possessed magnetism. He did not rise in a hurry ; but let the enthusiasm which followed the announcement of his name reach its crescendo, while he sat, mock-modestly, his head a little bowed, one big hand grinding out his cigar-butt on the ash-tray at his elbow. And when he did rise, there was no awkwardness in the movement, no awkwardness in the pose, and no sign—except for a slight quivering of the slightly Hebraic nostrils—of " nerves."

The black eyes, as they swept the audience, were hard as coal ; the thickish lips resolute and unflinching under the tight line of the black moustache ; the shoulders squared ; the long arms quiet at the muscled sides.

" Fellow members," he began, " fellow citizens of this great city, of the greatest commercial Empire this world has ever seen "—and the voice gripped her—gripped the whole room.

Already, she could feel herself being carried away ; already she could feel herself under the domination of this man. " He's like a flame," she thought, " like a flame out of the East." And again she caught herself envying this man's woman.

But as yet, though Rose's opening gripped him also, Irene's husband sat unmoved. Supposing—as Rose said—that the

Fellowship *were* on its feet, " a growing force, a force numbering ten thousand—ten thousand loyal men and women pledged, each and all, to serve their country." What then? Didn't most people serve their country? Hadn't five million men served it during the War?

" Words! " he thought. " Mere words."

" Loyalty! " ran those words. " A simple creed. The solider's. The statesman's."

And then, so suddenly that it seemed to the wondering Masterson as though the very man himself underwent a change, Rose the practised after-dinner speaker became Rose the true orator, an orator shaken with purpose, body tense, finger-tips pointing, the harsh voice a thunder in his working throat.

" A simple creed," thundered Rose. " But is it the creed of those whom chance has put in authority over us to-day? Are these Socialists loyal to our England, loyal to our Dominions, loyal to our flag, loyal to our fellow countrymen and loyal to our King? I say to you—in all solemnity—that they are not so loyal; that there are many traitors in our midst, traitors who would tear down—who are tearing down—this fabric of Empire which has been built up, loyally and laboriously by loyal and laborious men, through the dust and conflict of a thousand years. I say to you—in all solemnity—that it is the duty of this organization to help this country to rid itself of such traitors—not as other nations do these things—with the rope or with the rifle, with the garotte or with the guillotine—but with a deadlier weapon, the weapon of the truth."

Here, for a long quarter-minute, the harsh voice paused; and as it did so Masterson's eyes, glancing uncomfortable across the room, happened to meet Mary Millward's. It seemed to him that there was a hint of laughter in those eyes—and yet, behind the laughter, a purpose deadlier than Rose's own.

And now—as Rose, knowing his audience held, drew a paper from his pocket and saying only, " Treachery! By their works shall ye know them—by what they did against us while we were at war and by what they have done against us since the peace," began to unfold that record which no vote-mongering repentance can even partially erase—new longings stirred in John Masterson, Englishman; and by the light of those longings he read—just for one infinitesimal second—the message of a new desire.

§ 5

The record had been put away ; but Rose the orator was still on his feet, his fists clenched, his eyes flashing, hammering home the lesson of it to an audience all electric, an audience too excited even to cheer.

" Judge for yourselves," Rose was saying, " if those who pledged themselves to our enemies in the War can be trusted to rule us loyally in the peace—if he who bound himself, not ten months ago, to the Socialistiche Arbeiter Verein in Hamburg, is not still bound to that alien organization—if those who suffered the ignominy of prison rather than bind up one wounded soldier's hurt, are worthy to sit in that House which has never before been a house of treachery. Judge for yourselves if those others, those white-livered cowards who cringed to the Hun and the Bolsheviki for what they were pleased to call a ' democratic peace,' should be set in authority over this great Empire for which nearly a million men gave the greatest gift of all, the gift of life. Judge for yourselves if it be right—if it be even expedient—that those who preached pacifism and worse than pacifism, the creed of the secret word to the enemy and the knife in the soldier's back, should rule a race of soldiers—a race which, whatever its faults, has never let delusion blind it to the truth.

" Aye, judge them ! " Abruptly, his harsh voice rasping the electric silence, Rose swept into his peroration. " Ask yourselves—not in heat, not with anger—whether, if my record of them be true—and if it be not true, these traitors have their remedy against me—this Fellowship, whose object is to combat each and every form of sedition and of disloyalty, has not for its one duty to expose and to confound this party : not the *British* Labour Party but the *Foreign* Labour Party, this so-called *Independent* Labour Party above whose headquarters there floats no glorious flag of national independence, but the foul red emblem of that international misery which is international revolution—famine, anarchy, and death."

And on the word—so abruptly that it seemed to those who heard him as though the bated silence would never break—Rose's speech came to an end. Then, with equal abruptness, came storm—storm upon storm of cheers.

In that moment Rose himself knew nothing. Actual consciousness—even the memory of his last sentence—had petered out. Round him whirled a kaleidoscope of men's faces—of women's faces—of medals—of lights and of clapping hands.

Seating himself, he realized only that his head throbbed, that the sweat streamed from his every pore.

"Was I all right, John?" he managed to ask at a pause in the cheering.

"All right? My dear chap!"

There was no envy in Masterson's answer, only admiration. For at that moment, he too was beside himself, carried out of himself, carried away. In him kindled anger—the slow white anger which comes only to men of his breed. Anger spoke to him of war—of the blood-stained chalk and the blood-stained duckboards, of the mines and the gases, of the misery and the mud. Dirty work—war. Yet this work of treason to one's own kind was a dirtier! If Rose's record were true, these people—who, even while they spoke smooth words in office, let their tools preach poison to the mob—these people who, even as they had once pandered to the open foe, were now pandering to the secret revolutionary—must be swept from office, exposed, confounded, put to shame.

"Was it for men such as they are," he thought, "that men such as Charlie, Bobbie, David, died?"

So Masterson: all the while the tumult of applause was subsiding, all the while the other speakers, utterly eclipsed, were cutting short the words they had meant to say, all the while—still, in rage's despite, no orator—he spoke those last slow sentences which dispersed the gathering. And all this while Irene sat silent—strange thoughts, strange imaginations making her afraid.

For the Irene Mastersons of this world are not as other women; and it seemed to this one, in her fear, that Rose's speech, the passion and the fire of it, had poured some vivid stream of self-enlightenment into all her body; that, even while she listened to it, there had opened—right inside her body—a flower all sterile yet all scarlet, a flower whose name was knowledge, Knowledge of the Ways of Men.

She tried, as she rose slowly from the table, to close that flower; but men—all these men who came crowding towards Rose, shaking him by the hand, congratulating him—kept the flower wide open. And presently—her fear passing—she became glad of the flower; glad that she should understand how all these men—flushed of face, now; their eyes a little blood-shot; their voices a little loud, a little reckless—could be moved by the flower, moved by her very knowledge of them to knowledge of her. And presently—hardly knowing how it had come about—she found herself talking to Cynthia.

"Wasn't he wonderful?" whispered Cynthia. "Didn't he make you *feel?* Why didn't I marry a man like that? Why did I marry Tom? Why did I marry a stupid stammering fool."

And as her sister talked on, low-voiced, all emotionalized, the scarlet colour coming and going in her over-powdered cheeks, Irene Masterson realized—even as she had realized the opening of the mysterious flower—that she and Cynthia were bone of the same bone, flesh of the same flesh, instinct of the same instinct, soul of the same soul.

§ 6

But John Masterson, Englishman, realized nothing save the emotion of the patriot whose country may be in danger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

§ 1

NEXT day, waking a little later than usual (Rose, the dinner over, had insisted on dragging a round dozen of them, Rupert and Jill included, to the Embassy), John Masterson's over-night emotions struck him as slightly ridiculous. His friend Adrian might be a wonderful orator ; but surely—oratory apart—a man could profess Socialism without plotting the downfall of his country ?

And yet, the fact that many of these Socialists *had* plotted the downfall of their country while she was at war, stood out clear—and star-clear—from Rose's damning "record." Even cutting out the oratory, that record remained. From nineteen-fourteen to nineteen-eighteen many of these men *had* been traitors ; *had* played the dastardly roles of defeatists, of strike-fomenters, of encouragers to the enemy. Could these leopards change their spots ? Could politicians who had been disloyal to the fighting soldier be loyal to the working citizen ?

"Doubtful," thought John Masterson. "Devilish doubtful."

Breakfast over, he retired to his sanctum ; and sent Ivor for all the papers. The papers reported his own speech at some length, Rose's hardly at all. So he rang up Rose, and asked him why.

"Greater the truth, worse the libel," suggested Rose over the wire.

"That record *was* true, then ? "

"Rather. Every word of it. I can send you over the documents I extracted it from if you like."

"Thanks. I'd be very interested."

Mid-day brought the documents in question ; and thereafter, for a whole week, our friend devoted his spare time to studying the past history, the present tactics, and the political principles of the men who had captured British Labour Party.

With the result that—by the end of the week in question—

he had convinced himself that Rose's main contention was right; and that the old Labour Party, misguided perhaps, but "really British," had momentarily been swallowed up by a "heterogeneous mass of arid intellectuals, sterile agitators, sentimental old women, disgruntled office-hunters, renegade Irishmen, renegade Jews and renegade Parsees," the whole (though leavened here and there by honest if incapable gentlemen) "backed, bolstered and Bolshevized by the infamous I.L.P." whose funds, by some process of juggling which Masterson could not fathom, were derived partly from trouble-seeking aliens abroad, partly from self-seeking aliens at home, but mainly—and of this there could be no doubt whatever—from involuntary contributions wrung, week by week under the guise of "political levies," out of the pockets of the Trade Union working-man.

Yet even so, Masterson could not quite win back that momentary suspicion of his country's danger. England—after all—had always had her tub-thumpers. These people couldn't do much harm; may be, they even served a purpose.

He told Irene as much, one rare evening as they sat alone in their enormous drawing-room. But Irene did not seem interested. So in the end—a little hurt, perhaps, by her attitude—he opened his heart to Rose.

§2

That heart-opening happened quite fortuitously six days before the House of Commons re-assembled, when nobody—not even the best informed journalist in Fleet Street—yet dared to predict a General Election.

Masterson's Irene was motoring that afternoon; Rose's Isobel staying with friends in the country; and the two men—each in need of companionship—had foregathered in Rose's flat. It was raining at the time, and perhaps the sheer misery of the weather, rather than the confidential atmosphere of Rose's workroom or Rose's own prompting, made Masterson say, his blue eyes staring beyond the big window to where the rain-drops dimpled the river and the big trolleys, their lights already gleaming, droned ceaselessly by:

"Adrian, did I ever tell you what really made me come home from Abyssinia? It was the thought that I might be able to help my own people instead of foreigners."

He paused there; and Rose, his hand moving to the switch of his gold-shaded reading-lamp, watched him in silence.

"You're a quaint chap, John," finally commented Rose. "For a millionaire, the quaintest I ever met. What's bothering you so?"

"Mainly"—Masterson's eyes were still on the river—"the things you said the other night. It's all very well to say that the Socialists are a danger to the country. But some of them seem to be as honest as the day."

"How many of them?" Rose's voice was harsher even than its wont. "And what about their leader? Surely *his* war-record's black enough. And his peace-record, too. Take the Russian Treaty. Take the Campbell case. He daren't prosecute Campbell for saying, in nineteen-twenty-four, the precise things he himself said in nineteen-seventeen. Just as he daren't quarrel with Rakovsky and Company for fear of their blowing the gaff——"

"You can't be certain about that."

"You mean *you* can't be. Because you're not an Oriental. I am; and I can *smell* these things."

"How?"

"Never mind how." Rose laughed. "But you can take it from me, as a Jew, that these Bolshevik Jews are the dregs of my race. And that the dregs of my race are just as much anti-Gentile as the dregs of yours are anti-Semite. That's the whole truth of Bolshevism; and the sooner the Christian countries wake up to it, the better."

And the Jew—his face swarthy in the golden half-light, one hand stroking the metal cylinder of his dictaphone, and the other cupping his chin—talked on: till, all on a sudden, listening to him, there came to the Christian also a little of that gift of tongues which is so seldom given to the English breed.

"Adrian," said that sudden gift, "something tells me you're right. I don't want to believe—I hate believing—that Englishmen, Britishers, should have done what these Socialists have done. I want to believe they're just idealists—weak perhaps, misguided certainly, but at least true to their salt. My brain's not like yours, you see. It isn't quick. It doesn't *smell* things. It doesn't cherish suspicions! Only—only I can't get round that record."

"Why should you want to?" asked Rose; and Masterson, his gift still in his mouth, went on:

"Because, ever since I came home, my mind's been holding rather a brief for these Labour people. Because I've always thought they wanted to help the working-classes. And because I *like* the working-classes. It was the common man who won

the War for us; not people like you and me. We only shewed them how to do it. But these people"—once before, and once only, as two men lay mud-soaked and miserable under the shrapnel-fire their own ammunitionless guns could not answer, had Adrian Rose heard that exact tone of hatred in a pure-bred Englishman's voice—" these people are only using the working-classes, for their own ends, to bring about revolution. That's what they're really doing. And the fact that some few of them may be doing it unintentionally doesn't seem to me to count."

" It doesn't count," interrupted Rose, and his face was hard and grim in the golden half-light. " Nothing counts, in the history of a country, except results."

On which there ensued a long and pregnant silence: broken, at long last, by Masterson's abrupt, " What's one going to do about it, Adrian? How's one going to help?" followed by Rose's equally abrupt: " It's easy enough for you, old man. You're a millionaire. You're legally married. There's nothing on God's earth to prevent *you* from taking a hand in the political game."

§ 3

Very late that afternoon, walking home through the rain-drizzle, John Masterson's memory shewed him the image of another friend, of Frankie Farrar, patterning the table-cloth with square nail as he spoke of England to the exiles of Abyssinia. " Dry rot," Frankie was saying. " The end's inevitable." And with that image there came other words, the words of a poet, " Idle, openly idle, in the lee of the fore-spent line."

He thought of those words again, many hours later, when he woke, restless in the gray dawn, to look upon his Irene. Could love—should love—make a man idle, make him neglect his duty to his kind?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

§ 1

THREE days passed—each, for the country, of mounting political excitement ; each, for John Masterson, of mounting self-reproach. And he was reproaching himself now as he sat waiting for his friend and stockbroker, Rupert Starleigh, in one of the big leather armchairs of the half-empty smoking-room at the Caxton Club—thinking of how much he had planned to do, of how little he had actually accomplished with his father's fortune.

" I've been slack," he kept telling himself. " Why ? "

But his mind—as yet—refused any answer to that question ; and presently—seeking to distract it—he called for the afternoon papers. Politically, the afternoon papers were still sitting on the fence. There might, or there might not, be an Election. It depended on the Liberal attitude to the Conservative vote of censure ; it depended on the Conservative attitude to the Liberal demand for an inquiry into the Socialist Prime Minister's alleged interference with the processes of the Law.

" Rotten game—these party-manœuvres," thought Masterson. " Things that affect the actual safety of the country ought to be beyond that sort of chicanery."

And thinking of the safety of the country, his mind went back to " fourteen," to the dumb splendour of it, and the quiet glory of an entire race uprising, almost as one man, to do its simple duty. Had that race altered—as he himself seemed to have altered ? Had it grown slothful, unpatriotic, revolutionary ? Did these Socialists, and their Communist allies, really represent the spirit of the British race ?

Then—continuing self-reproachful—he began to consider Rose's suggestion that he himself might take a hand in politics ; and was still considering it, when the smoking-room door opened, and Starleigh, full of apologies, came gliding in.

" Sorry I'm late," said Starleigh, as he subsided into a neighbouring chair. " I've had quite a job finding out about

those debentures. They're nothing to write home about; but I should hang on for the present. Everything'll go better once we know where we are. What's the Election news in this market? The City seems to think it's off."

"So does Haringford. I was at Bedford Court Row this morning."

"Well, there's somebody who ought to be pretty sure."

Starleigh, lighting one of his eternal cigarettes, indicated a broad-beamed seaman-like member in a very well-cut blue suit who was staring in their direction from one of the book-cases at the doorway; and went on: "Wonder what old Martin's doing here at this time in the afternoon? He's the big bug at Central Office, you know. The trouble with our big bugs is that they won't work. Now if I had *my* way . . ."

The stockbroker, who had other financial matters to discuss, cut politics and began discussing them; but the seaman-like member by the doorway continued to stare; and presently—at a break in the conversation—came quickly across the room.

"How de do, Rupert?" said he. "Not interrupting, am I? Do you remember that deal in majorities you did for me last year? Cost me about five hundred of the best, if I'm not mistaken. Now what about another flutter?"

"*You* think then"—fished Starleigh—"that there *is* going to be an Election?"

The sailorly one winked; and having been introduced to Masterson as, "Sir Martin Black," drew up a chair, saying: "How about a spot? Mine's whiskey."

The "spots" came; and Sir Martin, winking again, drank to "those whom the gods make mad."

"Wild as loons, these Labourites," said Sir Martin. "They'll be out in a week—and once they are out, we can kiss 'em good-bye."

"Thanks for the tip, Martin." Rupert Starleigh smiled. "You're a pal. If ever you want a tenner or so for the party funds, come to me. Talking of party funds, though—why don't you tap old John here for a few thou? He's as rich as Crœsus—and then some."

"So I've heard," said Sir Martin, grinning all over his ruddy clean-shaven face. "But we're all right for money. *Our* trouble's going to be candidates. Especially in certain constituencies—constituencies like Thameside South."

"Thameside South!" Masterson's interruption was automatic. "But what's the trouble there?"

"What isn't the trouble there!" Sir Martin, who had not been staring to no purpose, came quickly to his point. "The

place is an absolute hot-bed. And our people don't want hot-beds. They want feather-beds. Sparlington's held the seat for twenty years—and means to go on holding it till he dies. Dangerous old cove, is Comrade Sparlington; and if we let him in unopposed, he'll be on every Socialist platform in London."

"Treasonable blighter, ain't he?" put in Starleigh.

"So—so." Sir Martin's eyes were on Masterson. "But Scotland Yard can take care of that end. It's his sob-stuff *I* don't like. To hear him talk to a lower middle-class audience, you'd think he was the last of the Twelve Apostles."

"Bit of a hypocrite, eh?" Again the interrupter was Starleigh.

"Bit of one!" Sir Martin's clean-shaven jaw snapped like the jaws of a feeding pike. "Comrade Sparlington's the whole boiling." Then, his hazel eyes still with Masterson, he went on, "Look here—if you're interested in Thameside South, come round and see me at Palace Chambers to-morrow. There's a young fellow wants to have a cut at it for us; but in my opinion he hasn't got a dog's chance. And the Local Association don't like him either."

Sir Martin—having got thus far—left the next move to the prospective candidate; and for quite a while thereafter the prospective candidate sat silent, weighing the thing in his mind.

As usual, Masterson's instinct was to procrastinate, to hedge. And yet—to fight Thameside South—to fight Sparlington, Sparlington of the Committee of Direct Action, Sparlington of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Councils, Sparlington of the Union of Democratic Control, Sparlington of the Shop Stewards' Movement, Sparlington whose name figured in almost every subversive movement about which Adrian had enlightened him! The mere idea was tempting, devilish tempting. After all, a man ought to do something—something more than mere philanthropy—to serve his kind.

"Well," prompted Sir Martin. "How do you feel about it?"

And on that, abruptly, all the emotions of many days massed to their culmination in our friend's mind.

"Feel about it?" he said. "Well—to be honest with you, Sir Martin, I don't feel I'll ever make much of a party politician. But as you're so set on this fellow Sparlington being fought—I'm blowed if I don't see why I shouldn't take him on."

§ 2

John Masterson had spoken that last deciding sentence calmly enough; but five minutes later, when he and Rupert Starleigh made their way down the steps of the Caxton Club on to the wind-swept pavement of Pall Mall, his eyes were as alight with purpose as they had been on that long-ago day when he had put off civilian kit to don the putties and the tunic of a nineteen-fourteen soldier. This fight with Sparlington—he told himself—would be the same fight he had fought then, a struggle against the destructive forces, against the foes of British civilization. And he told Starleigh as much—compelling him to "come back to Carlton House Terrace and celebrate the occasion."

One writes "compelling" of set purpose. For to Rupert Starleigh—ever since the night of Rose's dinner—the idea of visiting Carlton House Terrace had seemed thoroughly distasteful.

"Don't think I ought to," he protested. "Got to be getting back to the Albany. Got to take a girl to a show. Got to dress early . . ."

"Rubbish, my dear chap," said Masterson, grasping him firmly by the arm.

Crossing Waterloo Place, the arm released Starleigh; but the wind, buffeting his eyes, seemed ominous. "Ought to keep away," he decided. "No use looking for trouble."

And by the time they reached the Terrace; by the time that Masterson—a trifle talkative—had opened the door with his latch-key, all the decencies in Rupert Starleigh dictated flight. The very sight of the re-decorated smoking-room, reminded him that this was no longer John's house, but Irene's. Everything in it—the new furniture, the new cleanliness, the new comfort—bespoke the idiosyncrasies she had confided to him in the days of their intimacy.

"If ever I have a house of my own," she had confided, "there'll be no *glare*. Because I hate *glare* worse than anything." And here, as his friend clicked on the smoking-room switches, was no glare—only a soft diffusion of light from innumerable globes concealed under the deep oak cornice.

"Jolly idea, isn't it?" commented the enthusiastic Masterson. "Irene's, you know."

"Oh, very jolly indeed," admitted the awkward Starleigh.

For now—as Masterson ordered whiskey, and indicated one of the chairs by the smouldering wood-fire ("Logs everywhere," Irene had confided), there came to Rupert Starleigh another, and

a much nearer memory : a memory of the words she had said to him only ten nights ago, at the Embassy : " I've forgiven you, Rupert. Let's be friends."

Friends ! The word, the recollection of the half-provocative look which had accompanied it, angered Starleigh. " What's she playing at ? " he thought. " Does she imagine I'm going to be her tame cat—her platonic *ami de la maison ?* " And even while he was so thinking, he heard Irene's voice in the hall, saw the door-handle turn and the door open.

She wore brown that afternoon, a deep autumnal brown whose cut and colour aged her a little. At her heels slouched the Martinet. Taking the hand she proffered, he realized how much the few months of marriage had ripened her. " She's a woman, now," said the sensualist in him, " and fair game."

But the decencies in him were still stronger than the sensualist—and after she had smiled him welcome, after she had kissed her husband (so like a Carslake, that kiss—hadn't he seen Cynthia do the same to Tom ?), all his impulses turned, once again, to flight.

" Sorry," he said, fingering the thin platinum chain of his watch ; " but I've got to be off."

" You can't go till you've finished your drink, Rupert."

She seated herself, dainty and unperturbed, on the arm of John's chair ; and, watching her foot swing, all sorts of recollections—half prideful and half shameful—overwhelmed his mind. Thus, she had often sat with him. Thus she had sat with him, that first Sunday at the Albany, when . . .

" Irene, I've got great news." Masterson's voice cut the threads of his friend's musing. " I'm going to stand for Parliament."

" You're what, John ? " Starleigh, his eyes still on Irene's foot, saw that it had ceased its swinging.

" I'm going to stand for Parliament."

" When ? "

" Almost at once. We fixed it up this afternoon."

" We ? " Irene's green eyes turned slowly from one man to the other. " We ? What did Rupert have to do with it ? "

" Everything." Masterson laughed. " He introduced me to Sir Martin Black."

" And who is Sir Martin Black ? "

" One of the chief organizers of the party."

" I see."

But Irene, in that moment, saw nothing. Rage blinded her —rage unreasoning—hardly to be controlled. " Parliament ! "

said the rage in her. " Parliament ! Why should John want to go into Parliament when he's got *me ?* "

John—more excited than she ever remembered him—went on talking ; and as he did so, her rage-blinded eyes met Rupert's. Did Rupert know—was Rupert understanding—how this thing hurt ?

Rupert's gray eyes, however, were unusually expressionless ; and after a while she fell to reproaching herself for that impulse —immediate and as immediately gratified—which had urged her to " make things up with him."

They were all alike—these men. Creatures of no comprehension.

§ 3

And that night—for the first time—there came to Irene Masterson the idea, tempting though not altogether definite, that a woman might be entitled to treat these uncomprehending men as playthings, to use them only for her fun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

§ 1

BE a little sorry—at this stage in her career—for Irene Masterson. She was young; she was lonely; she was not as other women; and all through that week during which—as it seemed to Masterson—the very future of British civilization hung hair-poised on a puling Scotsman's whim, she was jealous; jealous of the pull which great affairs can exercise against any woman; fearful lest that pull should tear her husband from her arms. Also, admire her a little because—being as she was—she nevertheless managed to suppress jealousy, to oust fear, so to bear herself that Masterson, in the absorption of his new job, marked nothing of the truth.

And what a job it was! How it exasperated our friend! How it made him long for the simpler politics of Abyssinia!

These stay-at-home politicians—his very first visit to Palace Chambers taught him—were worse than many Ras Tafaris. They demanded his opinions on Tariff Reform, on Imperial Preference, on Local Option (one of Sparlington's hobbies!) and a hundred other subjects he had never even bothered to consider. They even demanded insight into his financial position; and when he gave it them wondered if he wouldn't like "something a bit cushier than Thameside South." Thameside South, they said, hadn't been "worked." And London constituencies had to be "worked."

Their views irritated Masterson; and he stuck to his guns. He would either fight Sparlington or he wouldn't stand. He would either fight Thameside South—for by now, his social conscience was again active, telling him that a good deal of the blame for Thameside South's being what it was, a hot-bed of revolution, lay at his father's door—or no constituency at all.

So, in the end—thinking him a fool, but rather admiring him for his folly—Central Office let him have his own way; and on the sixth of October—two days before the puling Scotsman toppled from office—Mary Millward ushered a young, sharp-featured, sharp-tempered, but very deferential Mr. Beneforth, and a gray-bearded. slightly disgruntled, but also very deferential

Mr. Adamson into the private sanctum at Carlton House Terrace.

"We'll do all we can," said these two—one the candidate's agent, and the other the Party's. "But"—this from Adamson, his old eyes flashing anger—"Sparlington's son's not the Mayor of Borough Bridge for nothing. You'll see something when you come down to Thameside South, Mr. Masterson; and the thing you'll see is what the Yankees call graft. Our Council dustmen earn more money than our skilled engineers; and the uncovenanted benefit Sparlington junior pays to our unemployed, gives his father ten thousand votes before *we* start. 'Christian charity' *they* call it. *I* say it's bribing the voters with the ratepayers' cash. I don't know what your rates are here; but ours are twenty-three shillings in the pound. We have whole families drawing five pounds a week for doing nothing—public auditors who are powerless—more Communists to the square yard than there are fleas in a blanket—and a furniture factory closed down for lack of orders while the chairs in the new Municipal Hall—go and see them if you like—were being bought from Russian assassins by the order of Mr. Paul Sparlington, the British worker's friend. It's an Augean Stable all right, is your new constituency."

"Then let's cleanse it," said John Masterson.

§ 2

"Then let's cleanse it."

Forward to that cleansing—once the Socialists had decided on their "dirty election" and he had been nominated as candidate for "the most hopeless constituency in the Metropolis"—our friend John Masterson moved like a Hercules obsessed. Outwardly calm, inwardly flaming, he wanted—more than he had ever wanted anything except marriage with Irene—to defeat Sparlington; Sparlington whose very election address proved him to be a smug hypocrite, a danger to the State and a perverter of the people whom he most professed to help.

"Vote Labour and Save your Children from the Capitalists," [illegible] Sparlington's first poster; and reading it as his Daimler whirled him through Borough Bridge High Street, the mind of Sparlington's opponent seethed.

"Do they use much of this poison gas?" he asked his agent.

"Little else," answered Beneforth.

"Then issue a counter-blast."

It was Adrian Rose who phrased that counter-blast. "The Labour party is Sold to Moscow. Be British. Vote for Masterson"; Mary Millward who took it to the printers; Ivor Carslake who saw

it posted from one end of the constituency to the other. After which, the Thameside South election became war to the knife.

"A dog-fight," said Rose; and with every passing day, John Masterson realized the exact truth of the saying.

Officially, he got little help in that dog-fight. To him, the party organization was useless. The Conservative literature held hardly a point for a Thameside South electorate. The few speakers Palace Chambers could spare were incompetent, feeble, unable to answer the simplest local question.

"Never mind," said Rose, "we've got the Press."

But Sparlington, also, had his Press—his *Daily Herald*, his *Worker's Weekly*, his *Forward*, his dozen other gutter-rags that poured their lies and their poison into the minds of the ignorant. So against those lies, against that poison, Rose mobilized a hundred canvassers from his Fellowship; sending them into the blind alleys down which no policeman ventured alone; into the public-houses where obscene women fought with their obscene mates and the children screamed in the rain outside; into the tenement buildings and into the factories, into the very heart of that slum-land which Sparlington claimed for his own.

For if ever a man worked selflessly for the sake of his friend, Adrian Rose worked selflessly for John Masterson through those weeks of the Thameside South campaign. And Mary Millward worked for him, too—wondering, day after weary day, at her understanding of this man, at the promptings which kept her to her task.

§ 3

And in those days there fell on Mary Millward, also, jealousy; a jealousy of Rose. Because always, as the campaign grew hotter, deadlier, it was Rose rather than she who helped this man, who swayed meeting after meeting to his will.

There were a dozen sedition-centres in Thameside South; so-called clubs where wild females of the I.L.P. preached treason, and pale young perverts stood hatless to the gloomy music of the foul "Internationale" and the foul "Red Flag." There were many foreigners in Thameside South—lying Russians and lying Boches—emissaries of the men behind the so-called British Labour Party, of those alien capitalists who had sworn to lay British Labour low. And, all these, the wild females, the pale perverts, the lying Russians and the lying Huns, allied with the disgruntled, with the hooligans, with the men and women of Mary's own race to whom the sound of their own voices was the breath of life, came to their meetings; came not to listen but to interrupt.

Every now and then, when his gift of tongues was on him, Masterson himself could deal with these people; and once—to Mary's amazement—she saw him rise up, a rugged figure in the naphtha flares by the Obelisk, and heard his deep voice go booming through the rain-drizzle till the very resonance of it caught the heart-strings of the crowd, and the crowd turned on its foreign interrupters, booed at them and hissed them away.

But such moments were rare. Because in Masterson, as not in Rose (strange that she should know it!), there dwelt a sympathy for the rough men and rougher women who, even when they listened to him, could not keep suspicion from their eyes.

§ 4

Mary Millward's jealousy against Rose, however, vanished in sheer admiration when—during the second week of the election—Paul Sparlington, losing his temper, issued a leaflet, "If you want to be slaves, vote Tory! If you love your chains, vote for your slum-landlord and his henchman Jew."

After that, whenever Masterson appeared alone on an open-air platform, some voice shouted up, "Slum-landlord! Yah—where's your Jew?" And this—Mary knew—hurt him. Whereas Rose—and hence the admiration—only laughed when he read the leaflet. Because him, nothing could hurt. Because him, no voice dared tackle. Because in him, as not in Masterson, dwelt all the powers of ridicule, all the weapons of scorn. Having no love for the people, he had no fear of them; and could jeer down an interrupter, flinging out one great hand to mark him from his fellows, and when he had jeered him down, call those fellows fools.

"Aye, fools," he used to jeer. "Blind! Do you think Sparlington cares for *you?* You say he's helped Thameside South. Perhaps he has. But he's helped himself, too. And out of *your* pockets. You can't deny that—though you'd like to. Sparlington came here a poor man. And what is he now? A capitalist. You know that. Yes, you, sir! How much did he give you to try and break up this meeting?"

And in the third week, when Sparlington, beginning to visualize the possibility of defeat, summoned his toughs; and Rose—wringing a reluctant permission from Masterson—summoned the younger members of the Fellowship, meetings actually were broken up; so that Mary Millward, along with all other women-helpers, Irene included, found herself banished from the fight.

It hurt her—more than a little—that she should be banished

from the fight ; and on the Saturday when Carmelite House—to its everlasting credit—gave all Fleet Street the Apfelbaum letter, she telephoned Beneforth to his bare little office above the Constitutional Club ; succeeding—on the Monday when the Socialists, hoist with their own petard, tried to whitewash their communistic allies—in returning to duty.

There were riots in Thameside South that day, stone-throwing and the drawing of razors and the hoarse growlings of the alien mob. And behind the alien mob, egging them on—while washing his hands of their deeds—stood Sparlington. Yet that day—for the first time—Mary Millward realized the possibility of Masterson's success. For that day, to each of Masterson's meetings, came the unconverted ; rough men in mufflers ; men with silver-badges of honourable service, cripples whom Sparlington and the likes of Sparlington were seeking to betray.

All uncertain were these men, all wavering, all amazed. And in their amazement they turned—as is their habit—to the man whom they knew—with that instinctive final knowledge of good and evil which is the only hope for democracy—to be honest, sympathetic, understanding of their view-point ; to the man who recognized that they cared, as much as he, for all that they knew of England, for the Borough Bridge High Street greasy under its lights, and the warm saloon-bar round the corner, and the tram-cars, and the green-grocers' shops, and the picture-houses where they sat with their girls, and even for those miserable rabbit-hutches in which they and their fathers before them had been born.

"He says it's a forgery," mumbled these men. "Sparlington says this 'ere letter's a forgery. We don't all 'old with your politics, sir. But we don't 'old with revolution neither—and we know you're a gentleman, we know you'll tell us the truth."

§ 5

Answering such questioners, telling them—out of his own knowledge—how the published letter was but one of many, one tiny link in the long chain of secret evidence against those who were seeking to destroy the country for which he and they had risked their lives, there came on John Masterson a fantasy ; and by the light of that fantasy he seemed to see the meaning of his own name : Masterson—the son of the master—the one man bound, by very reason of his dead father's mastery over these men, to serve them until he died.

And something of that fantasy, also, Mary Millward understood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

§ 1

"ADRIAN, do you *really* think he's going to win?"

"My dear, I may be a Hebrew; but that's no reason why you should expect me to be a prophet."

It was the eve of the poll; and Rose, standing with Irene by the tumbledown fireplace in Beneforth's bare little office, as fagged out as the rest of Masterson's helpers.

"What the dickens made you come down?" he went on. "You know the orders."

"Oh, damn orders." Irene peeled off her blue leather motor-coat. "Anybody would think you were fighting a war—not an election."

"Well—it's been pretty war-like the last three days."

"Then why is Miss Millward allowed to come down?"

"Ask Beneforth!"

Adrian Rose, kicking at the fire with one muddy boot, fell silent. Irene's last question, Irene's obvious ill-temper, the unexpectedness of her appearance (she had driven down at six o'clock of a rainy night in her new two-seater) told their own tale.

"Jealous!" decided Rose—his mind taking a little rest from politics to puzzle itself (not for the first time) over the problem of his friend's marriage. "That's interesting. I always imagined she married John for his money."

Meanwhile, Irene, as she wandered up and down the office—scrutinizing now the electors' chart pinned to the dirty wall, now the posters, and now the various documents on desk and typewriter table—was working herself into a fine state.

"Penny for your thoughts, my dear," said Rose suddenly.

"They're worth more than that."

"I've no doubt. But why not take them home?"

They were still sparring—more or less amicably—when Beneforth and Adamson came into the room. Beneforth—it amused Rose to observe that Irene did not mention Mary Millward to him—also made his protest at her appearance.

"Thameside South is all stirred up, Mrs. Masterson," went

on Beneforth. "The Reds are getting it in the neck—and they know it. Sparlington's having his final rally at the Baths—and that always means trouble."

"And our final rally?" asked Irene.

"We're holding three." Adamson spoke. "One at the Obelisk. One at the Market. And one in the Mission Hall."

"Then I shall go to all three."

Silence followed; and to that silence, there entered John. John's face—Irene saw instantly—was lined with fatigue. Like Adrian's, his boots were muddy. The old overcoat, the old billycock hat he wore, made him look like an ungainly tramp. And seeing him thus, her angry mind recalled their first encounter in Piccadilly. So this was the cave-man—up-to-date.

"My dear," he said; "what brings *you* down?"

The endearment, the slight huskiness which overmuch open-air speaking had put into his voice, soothed her a little; made her, for the moment, submissive to his will.

"Adrian's so angry with me, John," she began. "You're not, are you? You won't insist on sending me home?"

"Well"—his big mouth forced a smile—"you needn't go for a few minutes."

"But I don't want to go at all. I want to come to one of your meetings."

"I'd much rather you didn't."

Alone, she would have argued with him; but the presence of the three other men restrained her; and after a while Rose—his sense of comedy still uppermost—heard her say, "Darling, you look horribly tired. Oughtn't you to rest? Oughtn't you to have something to eat?"

"I'm going to," said Masterson.

"And may I come with you?"

"Of course. It's only in the next room."

Following her husband into that next room—a big, untidy, badly-lit apartment, unfurnished except for a few chairs, a gas-stove and a long table running down its centre; watching him while he munched his few sandwiches and drank his glass of beer, Irene's mood was still submissive.

"I'm not being fair," she told herself. "I'm hindering him in his work. A man, when he's at his work, doesn't want to be bothered with women."

§ 2

"A man, when he's at his work, doesn't want to be bothered with women!"

All the rest of the short while they spent together those words seemed to clarify Irene's entire issue. Supposing John won this Election?

"*You* won't be needed then," answered her imagination. "And even if you are, you won't be his *main* need."

And presently—after she had persuaded him to let her attend the Mission Hall meeting, after he had given her his kiss and gone off with Rose down the dim staircase to the Obelisk—her imagination began a new series of questions. Did John really need her at all? Wasn't he altogether too unsophisticated to understand a really truly modern woman? Wouldn't he have been happier with an older-fashioned wife? Say with Mary Millward?

But the thought of Mary Millward brought back all her rage; and after a while—back in Beneforth's office, with only Beneforth's Mr. Ulick, a suave young political understrapper who cultivated a tooth-brushed moustache and the Oxford manner, for her companion—she caught herself wishing, harder than she had ever wished anything before, that John should not succeed.

"I don't want him in Parliament," she decided. "I want him home—with *me*."

So deciding, she drifted into conversation with Ulick, who—as she had known ever since she first set eyes on him—was of the impressionable type. The young man's conversation, and his obvious admiration, served to distract thought.

"Do *you* think it's very wrong of me to have come down?" she smiled.

"I think it's very brave of you, Mrs. Masterson," answered Ulick; and the very tone of his voice was a reassurance—soothing to the nerves—of her power.

After a sentence or so, she suggested that Ulick should go and find Ivor; and when he agreed, saying, "Do you know, Mrs. Masterson, I always think your brother's one of the handsomest men I know," felt all her vanity thrill at the clumsy compliment.

"Delicious creature," thought Mr. Ulick, as he went to do her bidding; "and I believe she knew what I was driving at."

But by the time he returned to the office—Ivor, according to inevitable habit, having been discovered holding forth on his pet subject, horse-racing, to a group of local worthies foregathered, glass in hand, about the Club-room fire—the delicious creature, already into her motor-coat, seemed to have forgotten his existence. She went out of the room—"all in a flutter," as he described it to himself—without vouchsafing him a smile, without even so much as offering him her hand. For Irene, once alone, had given way to another attack of nerves.

"And do *you* think," she asked Ivor as they made their way down the staircase, "that he's going to win?"

"Win! Why, of course he's going to win. It's a cert."

"One of *your* certs?" The voice was tart.

"No. One of the Withers'. I've just layed even money——"

"Oh, have you?"

Brother and sister—wrangling as only brother and sister can—came, through an apology for a garden, through an open gate, across the greasy pavement, to Irene's car. A big policeman stood by the car; round him, had gathered a little knot of curious urchins. "Give us a ride, Miss," called one of these urchins as Irene took her wheel; and another, "Garn, she won't give you no ride. You ain't got no vote."

"Damned little hooligans," growled Ivor, climbing in; "for God's sake, don't run over one of them."

But Irene took no notice; starting recklessly, cutting in between a tram and omnibus, swinging round the first corner without troubling to hold out her hand.

§ 3

Half-a-mile from the Mission Hall—in slums where every window shewed a Sparlington handbill, and the children on the pavement spat at them, and waved red handkerchiefs in their grubby hands, and sang those obscene songs which obscene men and women teach, under the guise of religion, in the Socialist Sunday Schools—Irene was still venting her temper on the accelerator; and once they reached the Hall, applying her four-wheel brakes too sharply, she skidded against the kerb.

"Nice lousy lot, ain't they," growled a voice from among the little crowd which had scattered before her arrival. "Don't give a sugar *where* they drive."

But the rest of the hobbledehoys raised a cheer as she emerged from her coupé; and the male admiration warmed her, spoke to her—once again—of power.

Ivor, having asked the Cockney at the gate to keep an eye on the car, led her under the lamp over the gateway to the dark back entrance of the Hall; and through it—the heavy oak opening to his knock—into a cold unlit passage, beyond which, in a lighted ante-room, with school-benches piled under the Scripture texts along its walls, they re-found Beneforth, Adamson, and the two speakers—one a clean-shaven lantern-jawed barrister, and the other a wizened little person looking as though he couldn't say bo to a goose—who were to carry on till John's arrival.

"You haven't seen the Fellowship squad, I suppose?" asked Adamson of Ivor. "We're going to need 'em to-night, if my information's correct."

"The devil we are," remarked a slightly upset Ivor. But the arrival of the Fellowship squad—some dozen strong—only brought a smile to Irene's lips.

"Is there really any chance of a row?" she asked their leader, a determined-looking youth who wore a trench-coat and putties; and when he answered, "If there is, Mrs. Masterson, you can rely on us," felt rage vanish in sheer excitement. All said and done—if only John wouldn't take it so horribly seriously—even electioneering might be rather fun.

Presently, from beyond the ante-room, she heard the tinkle of a piano; and presently, following the gray-bearded Adamson down yet another passage, she had her first glimpse of the Hall. The Hall, seen round the edge of the door which led to the platform, shewed the usual gas-lights, the usual pack of serried faces. But the main doors had not yet been closed, and through them more people kept pouring in.

"We'll give 'em another few minutes," decided Adamson.

After five minutes, the doors closed; the platform-piano ceased its tinkling; and she followed Ivor, Adamson, Beneforth, who was taking the chair, and his two speakers into the glare of the gas-lights. Once more, cheers greeted her. Once more, listening to those cheers, she felt conscious of power.

Did John, too, want power? Was that what had made him stand for Parliament? Was she being a little unreasonable, a little disloyal, altogether rather a little beast about John? Why was John always so serious? Rupert hadn't always been serious. Need love always be so serious? Couldn't it be—every now and again—fun?

The inconsequent thoughts bothered her; and after a second or so, seeking distraction, she concentrated on the immediate scene.

The immediate scene looked peaceable enough. Two constables were guarding the far doors, by which stood the usual crowd of mufflered, collarless unemployed. All along the flag-draped walls, all along the cross-benches between, sat orderly working-folk, shopkeepers, petty merchants. Here and there, she saw the faces of women, some young, some old. Half way down the hall, she recognized two people she knew: a thin flapper in a hopeless hat, whom she had met during the first week of the Election, and a pimply youth in an ostentatious tie, who had some connection with Beneforth. Nearer still—immediately below the

platform—a paunchy red-faced man in a red waistcoat grinned at her every time their eyes met.

Beneforth, upright at the Chairman's table, had begun to speak. The Fellowship leader and his men, concealed from the bulk of the audience by the door which led to the platform, were listening to him without enthusiasm.

"As I said just now," vociferated Beneforth, "I've been at this game fifteen years; and in that time I've seen a good many Conservative candidates come to Thameside South; but I've never seen a better one—though perhaps I oughtn't to say so—than the man we're going to elect to-morrow."

"I tell you we ain't going to elect him," interrupted a voice; and Irene, watching the Fellowship leader, saw him stiffen to the alert.

"That's where you make a mistake, my friend," replied Beneforth. "You wait till to-morrow and you'll see!"

Whereupon, the audience cheered; the heckler subsided; the Fellowship leader relaxed his vigilance; and Beneforth, encouraged by the cheers, gave himself another five minutes. People were warming up now. They cheered again, vociferously, when the Chairman finished his opening and introduced the lantern-jawed barrister.

The barrister's speech—suave and unprovocative—failed to hold Irene's attention. Her mind went back to John. Where was John now? On a soap-box? If so, how ridiculous for John! How could politics, how could all these people, interest John? They had ugly bodies—these people—and childish minds. Why did they applaud that phrase, "I'm not talking about money wages. I'm talking about real wages"? Why did that absurd Voice interrupt, "'Ow much do you make, governor?" Why did the whole audience cackle when the barrister answered, "Not nearly as much as I'd like to, young man"?

At last, the barrister came to his peroration. At last Beneforth, rising again, introduced, "Mr. Benjamin Bones"—and now abruptly, as up rose the little wizened person who looked as though he couldn't say bo to a goose, it was apparent to Irene that the whole temper of the meeting had changed. Tremors ran through it. People whispered to one another. Boots shuffled on the floor. She saw the fat man with the red waistcoat remove his hands from his paunch, the thin flapper glance over her shoulder towards the back of the Hall, the pimply young man in the ostentatious tie nudge both his neighbours. Then the wizened little person began.

"The last time I spoke down here," he began—and his oratory,

to Irene's amazement, was a blend between a fog-horn's bellow and the rasp of a file—" I spoke for Paul Sparlington."

" 'Ear ! 'Ear ! " from the Voice.

" That was ten months ago," went on the speaker, taking no notice. " And may be I'd be speaking for Paul Sparlington now —if he hadn't lied about his visit to Russia."

" Liar yourself." This time, the interruption came not from one voice but from a dozen. " *You* ain't been to Russia. Russia belongs to the workers. Russia's a workers' Republic."

" Balderdash," bellowed the fog-horn. " Russia shoots *her* unemployed. A handful of foreign Communists boss Russia. And they want to boss us too. What about the Zinovieff letter ? "

" It's a bloody forgery."

" Then why did MacDonald answer it ? "

Ensued disorder : growls and cat-calls from the back of the hall ; cheers and cries of " Order " from the front. Beneforth sprang to his feet, rapped the table for silence. As he did so, Irene, glancing sideways at the young men of the Fellowship squad, saw them throw away the cigarettes they had started to smoke.

The disorder, however, subsided without other intervention than the Chairman's ; and for a minute, for two minutes, for three minutes the fog-horn, bellowing down all interruption, carried on.

" Good old lad, this," whispered Ivor, edging his chair close to hers.

" Yes. What is he ? "

" Used to be a Socialist before he came over to us. Knows his job, too. Funny-looking cove, eh ! Wonder where on earth he got that frock-coat from."

" Don't. He'll hear you."

Irene, one finger at her lips, turned to the audience. The bulk of the audience—she realized—was with Bones. Once, when he rasped out, " What's the use of lending good British money to bankrupt Russia ? If we've got money to spare, let's use it for ourselves," a tornado of clapping made the very flags quiver ; and another time, when he bawled, " We Britishers can manage our own business, we don't want any interference from a lot of foreigners," a bunch of John's supporters, headed by the man in the red waistcoat, chorused, " That's the stuff to give 'em. That's the stuff for Bolshies."

But at that, cat-calls recommenced ; and presently up rose a pale person in one of the last rows.

" I want to know——" shouted the pale person.

"Order," shouted the bulk of the audience.

"Let 'im ask 'is question," howled the Voice.

Beneforth rose now, hammering on his table. But the pale person refused to subside. "I want to know——" he repeated.

"And I want you to shut up," vociferated Beneforth.

Came more cat-calls; an incomprehensible bellow from Bones. Then, looking towards the doorway, Irene caught a glimpse of the Fellowship leader. The Fellowship leader was signalling his men to be ready.

"Is there really going to be a fight," she wondered . . . and, even while she was so wondering, Beneforth renewed his table-hammering; Bones rasped above the din, "Throw that damned alien out"; a woman tore a Union Jack from the wall and waved it above her head; the pale person whipped a red handkerchief from his pocket; three or four stewards rose in their place; the Fellowship leader and his squad dashed out headlong round the platform—and the mufflered men at the back of the Hall made the concerted rush for which the waving of that red handkerchief had been their signal.

Followed a second's respite; then—as the squad met that concerted rush—pandemonium. Irene saw the Fellowship leader reach the pale person, tear the red emblem from him; saw two others of the squad bowled over; saw the whole audience rise; saw the two constables plunge forward; saw the main doors burst open; saw more capped and mufflered men pour in; heard the thin flapper shriek, "Bert—Bert—for Christ's sake—the gang's 'ere"; heard the shriek drown in a tumult of oversetting chairs and stamping boot-soles and incoherent shouting.

"We'd better get out of this," said a voice—Ivor's—at her side.

As Ivor spoke, as he grasped her by the elbow, she would have given worlds to fly. But something—perhaps that rage which had been eating into her all through the last weeks—rooted her feet to the floor.

"No," she stammered to Ivor. "No"—and even while she was resisting him, the gang broke through to the middle of the Hall; and she saw its vanguard reach the pimply youth with the ostentatious tie; saw the pimply one stoop, whip up a stick, saw the stick broken in his hand; heard, from beyond the burst doors, police-whistle after police-whistle shrilling to the night.

"Come on! Don't be a damn fool," shouted Ivor in her ear.

She realized that she was fighting with Ivor; that below her, in the middle distance, other people were fighting, fighting—as it seemed—for their lives. Everywhere was dust—and through

the dust she could see men grappling one another : by the legs, by the bodies. Women, too, were grappling one another—grappling and screaming. She heard her own voice scream, " Ivor—let me go—let me go." And then, suddenly, out of the dust, straight for the platform, came the vanguard of the gang.

At the sight, every nerve in her seemed to freeze. She was aware, no longer resisting him, that Ivor had leaped from the platform ; that with him had leaped Beneforth, Adamson, the dull barrister, the frock-coated Bones ; that they, and the paunchy man in the red waistcoat, and half-a-dozen others, were at grips —at death-grips as it seemed—with the gang. Then—her nerves still frozen—she was aware of help at hand ; of a rush of police through the far doorway, and through the near, of Adrian and John.

Adrian and John came through the near door without haste—but without hesitation. Her, neither of them seemed to be regarding. Their eyes—John's coldly resolute, Adrian's blazing —were on the scrimmage round the platform ; and a second later, she watched them go into that scrimmage ; watched John grab one man, Rose another ; fling them from their opponents, fling them to the floor.

But even as John made for his second man, something bright flashed near John's cheek ; she heard Rose shout, " 'Ware razors ", saw Rose's clenched left crash home on a mufflered chin ; and heard the dull thud of a body striking the floor-boards, the thin tinkle of steel striking on wood.

After which—very curiously—almost as though every soul in the Hall had witnessed, and shuddered at, the incident—there followed silence, broken only by the harsh breathing of angry men and the click of belt-buckles and boot-soles, as the summoned constables pressed forward down the crowded gangways. And in that curious silence Irene's eyes gave her an impression—sharp as a photograph—of John.

John, unwounded, was bending over the man whom Adrian had toppled to the floor. By him, stood Adrian, Adamson, Ivor ; semi-circled behind him, a little group of attackers and attacked ; among them, the Fellowship leader, his face bloody, the picked-up razor which she had seen flash at John's cheek in his hand.

John's face, the blood on the face of the Fellowship leader, the twinkling razor seemed to fascinate her : so much so that—even when the photograph came to life—she had no more precise consciousness of what was happening in the Hall.

She was only conscious of terror. How could she have borne it—*could* she have borne it—if that blood had been John's blood, if the razor had made an end of John ?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

§ 1

In the mind of John Masterson—as he watched massed constables disperse his final rally at the Mission Hall—was a queer conflict of emotions: sorrow for the actual occurrence; self-reproach for his weakness in having let Irene come to this meeting; doubt of the morrow's issue; rage.

Mainly, however—despite his outward calm—rage predominated. That his own wife should have been in danger from these hooligans; that, approaching her where she stood on the platform, he should see her white to the lips, her hands, her knees, her whole body shaking, appeared to him the final comment on the whole issue of that class-warfare which Sparlington and his likes had been preaching for the best part of a generation.

By the time he reached her; by the time he had handed her down from the platform and out of the Hall into the ante-room, she seemed to have conquered the worst of her fright. She even managed to smile at him—a trifle wanly—when he told her, "We'll get away in a minute or two—as soon as I've seen what's to be done about our friend with the cutlery." But, leaving her in Ivor's charge on one of the benches, rage still impelled him—very definitely—to make his assailant pay the penalty for her fear.

His assailant—consciousness regained—stood at the far end of the ante-room, surrounded by a little group, which included the two constables who had carried him out of the Hall, Rose, Adamson, Beneforth and the Fellowship squad-leader; and making his way into this group, Masterson found himself confronting an ill-dressed, ill-fed youth, pallid, the greasy muffler loose about his thin neck, his eyes the eyes of the hare when the greyhound turns her, his knees wobbling in their patched trousers, his lips quivering over decayed teeth.

"Attempted murder!" Adamson was saying. "That's the charge."

"An outrage!" said Rose. "An infernal outrage. I saw the whole thing."

Whereupon one of the constables, notebook in hand, turned to Masterson, with a deferential, "I understand, sir, that this man attacked you with a razor; and that had it not been for Major"—with a glance at his book—"for Major Rose's intervention he might have done you grievous bodily harm."

"That's correct," began Masterson—his rage still on him; but even as he spoke, his eyes met his assailant's. His assailant's eyes were no longer as the eyes of the turned hare. They were sullen now—sullen and resigned to their fate. In them—it seemed to him—he could read all the hopelessness, all the misery, of Humblestone Street.

"Whose fault?" he thought. "His? Or Sparlington's? Or my father's?" And on the thought, rage left him. Was he, John Masterson, triply a millionaire, well fed, warmly clad, to charge this miserable fellow with attempted murder, to lock him up—possibly for seven years—in a prison?

Yet even so, even though his rage had left him, commonsense bade him take action against the man. As a citizen, one's duty was to suppress lawlessness. As a citizen, one had no right to tolerate any form of crime.

Then, before he could think further, the other constable, gripping his assailant by the arm, said, "Thank you, sir—we'll take him round to the Station now. You can charge him to-morrow"; and abruptly common humanity sent commonsense by the board.

"Take him to the Station if you want to," said John Masterson. "But as far as I'm concerned, I shall make no charge."

§ 2

The little scene was over. Masterson's assailant, mumbling gratitude, had shuffled out of the ante-room. From the Hall, came the sound of a few of their supporters singing 'God Save the King.'

"I'm for Fleet Street," said Rose to Beneforth. "We must try and get this written up for to-morrow."

Meanwhile Masterson—all else dismissed—had rejoined his wife and brother-in-law. "You can drive the two-seater home," he told Ivor. "We'll go with Rogers."

Irene—rather to Masterson's surprise—made no protest at the suggestion; only smiled, still wanly, as he took her by the

arm and escorted her through the back entrance of the Hall into open air.

In the open air—under a renewing rain-drizzle—the flickering gas-lamp over the iron gateway shewed them a black mass of people who cheered, loud and long, as they emerged into view; who shouted after them, "Good luck," and, "Never mind them 'ooligans," and, "You wait till to-morrow," as Rogers started his engine and the Daimler glided for the West.

But for the moment the cheering left John Masterson cold. By the light in the roof of the car, he could see that Irene no longer smiled; that once again fright had her in its grip.

"Put out the light, John," she stammered. "John—please, please put out the light."

He did her bidding; and doing so, realized her—for the first time in his experience—on the verge of tears. And presently, he heard her sobbing—hard, dry sobs, deep down in the throat. He put an arm round her; tried to comfort her. But the sobs continued; and he could feel that her body was all tense, unresponsive to him.

"Steady," he said. "Steady. There's nothing to panic about."

She relaxed at that; turned to him; clung to him. "Hold me," she stammered, still sobbing. "Hold me to you. Close! Close!" and as he held her to him; "Darling, darling, you might have been killed. What should I have done if you'd been killed? I couldn't have borne it if you'd been killed. And I want you to win. Oh, I do so want you to win."

At last, her sobs ceased. At last, silent, she settled herself in the crook of his arm. Looking down on her, he could just see the lashes flutter like black butterflies against the magnolia of her cheeks; could just smell the faint magnolia-perfume of her hair.

"Only a child," he thought. "Only a child." And the thought unmanned him a little; so that, by the time they rolled out of Queen Victoria Street on to the Embankment, he had almost forgotten the happenings at the Hall.

But once they made the West End; once she had released herself, still silent, from the crook of his arm, those happenings recalled themselves—very sharply—to his mind. Here, in the West End; here, where the theatre-lights and the cinema-lights glittered; here, where big cars and little went purring about their pleasure-businesses, who cared for the Thameside Souths of London; for those poorer constituencies out of whose middens there might one day spring, even as the armies sown from the

dragons' teeth, the ill-fed, ill-educated army of the Revolution, that army whose one objective would be loot and women, that army whom politicians like Sparlington would first make use of —and then disown ?

§ 3

And the thought of those poorer constituencies was still harassing John Masterson's mind when—some half-an-hour later —he sat alone in his vast dining-room at Carlton House Terrace.

Irene—more submissive than he had ever known her—had yielded to his entreaties and retired to her bed. Belton—their new butler—was serving him his supper. Candles glowed on his mahogany. A bright log-fire glowed on his hearth.

"Turtle soup, sir," said Belton. "Roast partridge, sir. Another glass of champagne ?"

But the turtle soup, the partridge, the champagne seemed to stick in his gullet. And after Belton and the footman had left him to his own devices he sat for a long while, listless, his eyes fixed on the one unchanged thing in this transformed apartment, on the picture of his father that still hung, in that incredible gold frame, above the new marble chimneypiece between the two new sideboards.

"How did *you* stand it ?" thought John Masterson, once more trying to read the riddle of those queer, half quizzical, half benevolent eyes. "How did you stand this life—knowing, as you must have known, the lives of the people who worked for you ? Couldn't you foresee how, out of those lives, and out of the Humblestone Streets you built for your workers, would come vice and crime and misery and such material for revolution as that poor devil who drew his razor on me to-night ?"

To which the eyes of John Masterson's father—still preserving their riddle—seemed to reply, "I was of a harder age. I and my likes made an Empire. What are *you* making ? Can *you* foresee the consequences of all that *you* do ?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

§ 1

THAT night, for the first time since his marriage, our friend John Masterson, sleeping in his dressing-room, slept badly; and next morning, as he breakfasted alone—at a quarter to seven—his father's eyes renewed their question, "I and my likes made an Empire. What are *you* making—you, of this softer, slacker, more sentimental age?" And the question in his father's eyes was still troubling him when—breakfast over—Mary Millward entered the dining-room, saying, "Major Rose was on the telephone just now. He thought you might not have seen the papers. So I brought down mine."

His secretary's paper, handed to him open, gave an account of the fracas at the Mission Hall; and as he read that account, Masterson frowned.

"Is this Rose's doing?" he asked.

"Yes." Mary Millward smiled. "Major Rose seemed very pleased about it. So did Mr. Beneforth. He's been on the telephone, too. They both think it'll be worth a thousand votes."

Mary Millward went out, leaving him alone with the paper. Alone, he gave way to irritation. The very headline, "CANDIDATE FIGHTS COMMUNISTS—BUT REFUSES TO PROSECUTE RAZOR-MAN," seemed to turn him into a mountebank. "Play-acting," he thought. "If that's the way to win elections, I'd rather lose."

Just as he made to leave the breakfast-table, he was disturbed again—this time by Coralie. "*Pardon, Monsieur,*" said Coralie. "But madame is awake. She demands to see you before you depart."

"All right. Tell your mistress that I'll come at once."

Following Coralie out he re-encountered Mary Millward, already dressed for the street.

"I'm sorry to bother you," began Mary Millward, "but Major Rose has rung up again. His chauffeur has had an accident. He wants to know if he can come with us."

"All right. I shan't be long."

Leaving his secretary in the hall, making his way upstairs to his wife's bedroom, John Masterson could not help congratulating himself—as constantly during those last weeks—on his secretary's tremendous zeal. "The woman's invaluable," he thought. "Positively invaluable. Beneforth was quite right to put her in charge of the cars."

All thought of Mary Millward, however, disappeared at the sight of Irene, who, sleepy-eyed among her pillows—her letters not yet opened and the cosy still on her silver chocolate-pot—stretched out a languid little hand, saying, "Hallo, bachelor-man. Come and kiss me. Come and let me wish you luck before you go"; and as he took that little languid hand, as he kissed her—a little clumsily—on the warm cheeks, on the warm forehead, John Masterson's whole heart went out in gratitude for her safety, in utter love of her adorableness.

"Better?" he asked, after she had released herself from his arms. "Did you sleep?"

"Like a top." The little languid hand combed the curls from her temples. "And you?"

"Only so-so."

"Why? Were you worried about me?"

"I was—a little."

His answer seemed to please her.

"Was I quite impossible last night?" she went on. "Or have you forgiven me?"

At which, he kissed her again.

"I'm coming down some time after lunch," she told him when they parted. "Take care of yourself, won't you, darling? Because you really are a very precious man."

§ 2

"Take care of yourself, darling. You really are a very precious man."

All the while his big Daimler—Rogers had decorated it overnight, wreathing blue streamers from roof to radiator-cap and pasting a big blue bill, "Every Vote for Masterson is a Vote for England," on the under part of the wind-screen—was whirling him to his constituency, those words echoed and re-echoed in John Masterson's mind. All the while Adrian Rose and Ivor (who had "darted up," five minutes late, in an orange-and-black taxi) were discussing the chances of his election, his thoughts remained with Irene, sleepy-eyed among her pillows. And all that while Mary Millward, silent at his side, was conscious—

vividly, and acutely, and heart-rendingly conscious—of a sensation never before experienced, the sensation of loneliness.

She tried—puzzled by the very violence of this new sensation—to analyze it. But the sensation defied analysis, and after a while she gave up the struggle, thinking, "I *am* lonely. What's the use of pretending I'm not? I've been lonely ever since father died. And I shall go on being lonely—because I'm that sort of woman."

Then, for no precise reason she could imagine, she began thinking about the other sort of woman, the sort of woman who was never lonely; till presently it seemed to her as though that other sort of woman were typified—doubly and trebly and quadruply typified—in the wife of her employer.

"He loves her," thought Mary Millward, glancing covertly at Masterson's fine, rugged face. "Any man would love her. And I—I . . ."

But from that last half-formulated thought her whole mind shied as a horse from a wayside fire; and in her mental confusion she was more than glad to be drawn into an argument by Rose who—rousing Masterson from his love-dreams—had pointed out the latest *Daily Mail* poster: the slogan "Under Which Flag?" printed bold over the red emblem of Anarchy and the red-white-and-blue of the Union Jack.

"That's the truth," Rose was saying. "Isn't it, Miss Millward? And that's why old John oughtn't to kick at that little bit of propaganda I did for him last night."

§ 3

It is written in the political history of this our Empire how—on the twenty-ninth day of October, nineteen-twenty-four—the British people once more vindicated its reputation for national commonsense. But because, in politics as in battle, the fighter's vision limits itself to his own fighting front, there is no need to incorporate more than a fragment of that day's history in the history of our friend.

To him, once he reached his constituency, all that day became a weariness, petty beyond belief.

At eight-thirty he started—in an open car, the Union Jack waving from its hood—on his first round of the polling stations. At ten-thirty—hating the mountebankery of the thing, finding the cheers that greeted him forced, the counter-cheers for Sparlington equally so—he repeated the process.

At twelve—returned to Headquarters—he had a glimpse of

Mary Millward, standing on the steps of the Constitutional Club, a long list in her hand and chauffeurs crowding all about. " A goddess of the machines," Rose called her. And Sparlington, too, had machines—horse-drawn or petrol-driven : so that, as the day wore on, threateningly to a gray afternoon, it seemed to both men as though the entire action were one of transport, as though no single voter on their own side or on the other would record his vote of his own free will.

Twelve-thirty saw Masterson making his third tour of the polling-stations ; and . is time the polling-stations shewed more activity. There was a ga 3 by the Borough Bridge Town Hall—and that gang hooted the Union Jack as it went by. But in many of the wards little knots of working-men, released from their factories, shouted to wish the Conservative candidate " Good Luck " ; and in some, the reports of Beneforth's watchers were positively optimistic. " Never seen anything like it, sir," said one of these. " Fifty per cent. more than last year. It's the ' silent voters,' I reckon. There was a chap here just now—came in a bath-chair—who told me he hadn't made his cross since the seventies."

At two, the Conservative candidate returned to the Club. His secretary was still standing on the steps—her chauffeurs around her. She looked—he thought—a little weary, as she told him, " Mrs. Masterson's here: Upstairs. With Mr. Ulick."

Upstairs, in the office, all three telephones were ringing as though their bells would never cease. Beneforth sat at one instrument ; Adamson at another ; Ulick's typist at the third. Masterson caught scraps of their conversations—" No. There's been no trouble so far," " Yes—we're hopeful," " Yes. I asked Miss Millward—she's sending to fetch them at five o'clock "—as he greeted his wife.

" Poor man," said his wife, rising from her seat at Ulick's table, " you must be starving."

It occurred to him that he was starving ; and he let her lead him to lunch.

Lunching, scrappily, on tinned tongue and hunks of bread, he was joined by Rose ; and presently—to Irene's surprise—by Rose's Isobel, obviously at a fever-pitch of excitement. " I've been working in Thameside North," explained Rose's Isobel. " But things are so bad there that they won't let us go on. You never saw such scenes. I believe that nigger's going to get in. He's got gangs everywhere. They're armed too—and half our people are afraid to leave their houses."

Later, Mary Millward snatched a meal ; and later still, Ivor,

very *affairé*, very worried about the weather. "This damned rain," grumbled Ivor. "It'll dish us if it gets any worse."

And by four, the rain did get worse: so that Masterson's last tour of his constituency proved something of a fiasco; and by six, Mary Millward, listening to the reports of her wet and weary drivers, was envisaging defeat.

"Shall I care?" thought Mary Millward. "Does it matter? Does anything matter except this horrible feeling that I'm lonely, that I've got to go on being lonely—always—because I'm that sort of woman?"

§ 4

And the other sort of woman—Irene?

In her, too, ever since John had kissed her good-bye, had been something of loneliness.

Right through this day, a thousand different fears, a thousand different desires, a thousand different jealousies seemed to have been at work on her; right through this day—it seemed to her—she had been two utterly different women: the first loyal and the second disloyal: the first hoping for John's success, the second for his failure. For if John failed, then, once again, he would be all hers.

"He hasn't been mine," thought that second woman in her, watching him while they ate—at nine o'clock, with the polls closed, of the hot meal which the steward had laid for them and their helpers in the big ground-floor dining-room of the Club—"he hasn't been really mine since that afternoon when he came home with Rupert. He never will be really mine again—unless he loses this election." Yet even so, once they had adjourned—all who could squeeze themselves in—to pore over the reports in Mr. Ulick's office, the first woman in her could not help sending up a little voiceless prayer for his success.

"You are an unsporting little beast," thought that first woman in her, when Beneforth, after scrutinizing the reports, told Adamson, "With any luck, we're home"; and Adamson, a flash of fire in his old eyes, turned to John, saying, "Twenty years, I'll have waited for this, Mr. Masterson, and if it's come off at last I'll—I'll dance a jig on the steps of the Town Hall."

But the first woman in Irene Masterson went completely by the board when—just as they were preparing to start for the Town Hall—Mary Millward came quietly into the room. Because in that moment she grew aware—as never before—of Mary Millward's beauty.

To-night, something seemed to have humanized, to have vitalized that beauty. Work-worn, weary-eyed, unfashionable in her every-day clothes, her husband's secretary radiated nevertheless—or so it appeared to Irene—an aura of magnetism, an aura of sex. And, conscious of that aura, there fell upon her yet another jealousy—a jealousy so violent that, compared with it, all others in her young experience were tame.

Suddenly, she found herself hating this Mary Millward; hating her for her efficiency, for her mental poise, for the very way she did her long hair and the very way she carried her tall body—but, above all else, for her usefulness to John. Suddenly, she felt that she must rid herself of this Mary Millward, drive her out of her life—and out of the life of John.

And that mood of complete sex-resentment was still Irene Masterson's as her Lanchester, Palethorpe at its wheel, John silent at her side, drew up—after five minutes' scurry through the storm-splashed night—outside the Borough Bridge Town Hall.

§ 5

Outside the Town Hall, despite the rain, crowds waited. Union Jacks and red flags were waving under the big opal lamps. Cheers sounded as the candidate and his wife emerged from their car. A few hisses followed them as they went up the steps.

Just inside the big portico, stood Ulick and Beneforth.

"See you when it's all over," said Masterson to Irene.

He handed her over to Ulick; and disappeared, Beneforth following, through oak doors, guarded by constables, into gloom.

"This way, Mrs. Masterson," purred the impressionable Ulick; leading on, through more gloom, to the foot of a marble-balustered staircase, and up it till they reached a long gallery.

The impressionable one found her a seat; and looking down over a wooden rail, Irene saw a big bare chamber; at one end of which green-shaded lamps shewed some twenty or thirty girls and a couple of men seated behind a breastwork of tables. Directly opposite her was a huge white-faced clock. At the other end of the chamber, a queer person in blackest broadcloth was stooping over a number of big zinc boxes; and in the middle of it, well separated from one another, stood John talking with Beneforth, and Sparlington talking with his agent, a little red-headed person, eye-glassed and obviously at high tension.

"That's the Returning Officer," explained Ulick, indicating the person in broadcloth. "He's breaking the seals of the

ballot-boxes. When he's done that, he'll carry the voting papers to those girls and they'll start counting. They do the papers up in bundles of a hundred."

"Fifty," corrected Rose, taking the seat at Irene's other side. "What do you think of Comrade Paul?"

So far—absorbed with more intimate sensations—Irene had taken scant interest in the proceedings; but, as Rose spoke, Sparlington happened to glance up at them; and, surveying him, she experienced surprise.

Always, from Adrian's talk and John's speeches, she had imagined this man to be the typical revolutionary, wild-eyed, black-bearded, uncouth and unkempt. Instead, she saw a typical Nonconformist, sleek, silvery-headed, pale of clean-shaven cheek, watery of gray eye; who sported a white moustache, a portly-pompous figure, and a gold ring in the red tie which circled his high-collared, slightly swollen neck. Sparlington's clothes—though a trifle old-fashioned—were distinctly smarter than John's; and when he coughed—which he did all the while the Returning Officer was at his seal-breaking—he covered the cough by pressing a very expensive silk handkerchief to his mouth.

"Wish it'd choke him," went on Rose amiably.

Meanwhile, all about them, other people were coughing; and presently Irene became aware that every seat in the gallery was now occupied. Behind her, she could hear the constant scrape of boot-soles, the constant chatter of women. Looking along the rail, she saw Mary Millward talking with Rose's Isobel—and again, sheer sex-resentment wiped out every other sensation.

Then Rose whispered, "They're off"; and abruptly her mind concentrated on John.

She looked down again. The zinc ballot-boxes were emptying one by one. At the breastwork of tables, under the green-shaded lamps, the girls, supervised by their two foremen, had begun the counting. The counting seemed vastly complicated. Beneforth and Sparlington's red-headed little man with the eye-glasses had moved close to the tables. They were watching the girls at their work. Some way away—ten good yards separating them—stood Sparlington and John. She wondered if John were terribly excited. John didn't look excited; but once in a while she saw his right hand take counsel with his moustache.

The complicated game went on. Soon, the Returning Officer had emptied all his ballot-boxes. Soon, the girls began tying the voting papers into bundles; the two foremen to arrange the bundles in two piles on the centre table.

"One pile's ours," explained Ulick. "One's his."

"Ours is on the right," said Rose.

All about her, in the gallery, she sensed excitement. The pile on the right—she could see—was very slightly larger than the pile on the left. "He's going to win," she thought. "John's going to win. I'm going to lose him." And at that the counting fingers of the girls seemed pregnant—pregnant with her own destiny.

Presently, first one girl and then another rose from the tables. She realized that there must be some query about the votes; saw the girls speak with the foremen, the foremen with the Returning Officer, the Retnrning Officer with the two agents, with Sparlington and John. Sparlington appeared angry, John doubtful. She heard Sparlington's red-headed agent say, "But, damn it, man, you can't throw out a whole ward!"

The Returning Officer's answer, she could not catch; but she saw Beneforth smile as he gave his ruling.

"Bit of luck, that," announced Ulick. "He's barred the lot."

The girls sat down again; continued with their counting. She looked at Sparlington. Sparlington's face was a study in rage; his thick lips worked, his stubby-fingered hands quivered at his sides. In the gallery, excitement mounted. Women had ceased their chatter. Hardly a boot-sole scraped on the boards. From outside, muffled through the thick walls, she could just hear the occasional hoot of a car, the occasional rumble of a tram. "Do I really want John to lose?" she asked herself. "Do I really want that horrible man to beat my John?"

She looked at the clock. The clock-hands pointed to eleven. Below her, wrangles had subsided. The piles of voting-papers on the centre table seemed more or less equal. "Neck and neck so far," whispered Rose, his voice hoarse, his breath hot at her ear.

A quarter of an hour passed, half-an-hour, forty minutes. Then John's pile seemed to swell; and Rose whispered, "We're leading. You'll be an M.P.'s wife yet."

The words excited her. She could feel her hands, her knees, her whole body begin to tremble. Suddenly, she wanted John to win; prayed her hardest for him to win.

Five minutes more! And John still leading. The scene below grew dark—darker. Fog crept into the Hall; and through that fog she saw only John. Dear John! How calm he was. Why couldn't Adrian be calm?

Adrian was whispering again, "We've almost done it. By

God, I believe we *have* done it. Another five hundred. That must be fifteen hundred—no, two thousand ahead."

The fog cleared; and she found herself watching Sparlington. Sparlington's face had gone gray—a queer ashy gray. He was coughing again—into that expensive handkerchief. Why must Sparlington cough! How she hated Sparlington. How she wanted John to win. And John was going to win.

She glanced at the clock again. One minute to midnight! Would this business never end; would it never, never end?

Midnight!

And now, all on a sudden, Irene realized that Rose, Ulick, all the little group of John's supporters behind her chair had given way to doubt.

"What's happening, Adrian?" she whispered. "Mr. Ulick, I want to know what's happening."

But neither Ulick nor Adrian seemed to hear. Their eyes were on the centre table; and following the direction of their eyes she saw the pile of Sparlington's bundles mount under the foreman's hand. Sparlington had approached that centre table. He had stopped coughing. His cheeks seemed to have regained a little of their colour. The semblance of a self-satisfied smile flickered under his moustache. The green-shaded lights shewed her that the other tables were emptying. And presently Adrian spoke again.

"Last lap!" said Rose. "It depends on Ward Six."

Another five minutes passed—another ten. And now, all in a flash, by the very look on Sparlington's face, Irene knew that the game was going against John. But John's face gave her no sign. What a man he was, this John! How she adored him! How she would console him if—if . . .

Another minute. Faster worked those pregnant fingers—and faster; and always, as they emptied their tables, the pile of Sparlington's votes on the centre table grew. Adrian was swearing—incoherently between clenched teeth. All about her, she heard tense whispers, "Sparlington—Sparlington!"

And now, all in a flash, the whisperers started rising from their seats, pressing forward, craning their heads over her where she sat by the rail. And now, all in a flash, as she, too, rose, she had another glimpse of Mary Millward—white-faced, her gloved fingers clutching the wooden rail as though they would squeeze the grain from it. "What does it matter to her?" she thought. "What can it matter *to her?*"

Then all thought vanished; and, staring down, she felt her very heart stop its beating. This was the end—definitely the

end. All the girls except one had finished their counting. By the centre table stood John, Sparlington, making play with his silk handkerchief; the Returning Officer.

The Returning Officer was talking with his two foremen. The Returnng Officer was fingering some loose papers. The Returning Officer had dropped his papers. He was fingering the two piles of bundles on the centre table. The last of the girls had risen from her work. She was handing a bundle to one of the foremen. The foreman was handing the bundle to the Returning Officer. The Returning Officer was looking at Sparlington; touching him on the shoulder.

She heard Adrian say, "Damn it! Damn it and blast it. The bloody fellow's beaten us on the post."

§ 6

Adrian was still swearing. Mary Millward's hands were still clenched on the rail. Even Sparlington's supporters had scarcely started to cheer. But already, in the mind of Irene Masterson, was relief. John hadn't won! John was hers again—all hers. And she must go to him—now.

"Can I go to my husband?" she asked Ulick. "Can I go downstairs?"

"Well, really . . ." began Ulick.

Angry, she brushed the protest, the man himself, aside. Angry, she pushed past Rose; pushed her way through their own supporters, through Sparlington's. The contact with these people added to her anger. How dare these people, how dare anyone, try to keep her from John?

But once she was through the crowd, once she gained the doors of the gallery, once she began to make her way down the big marble-balustered staircase, her anger subsided. There was nothing to be angry about now; nothing to worry about; nothing to do except grasp this happiness the fates had given—and, grasping it, console John.

At the foot of the big staircase, she paused, smiling at that last thought. Then, walking quite slowly, inquiring her way first of one loiterer and then of another, she went on, down some half-a-dozen passages, through some half-a-dozen doors, till she reached the Council Chamber.

John, as she entered, had just given Sparlington his hand. The little red-headed agent was shaking hands with Beneforth. From above, both sides were cheering the gestures. "How silly it all is," she thought, going across the room to John.

John's eyes gladdened as she came across the room; and turning from Sparlington, he met her half-way.

"Near thing, wasn't it?" he said. "Another couple of hundred and I'd have been in."

"Poor darling"—Irene spoke low—"aren't you awfully upset?"

"Well—of course—I'd rather it had gone the other way. Just as I'd rather not have shaken hands with Paul Sparlington."

"Then why did you?"

"Custom of the country, my dear."

John laughed—something of annoyance in the laughter. "I'm afraid we shan't be able to get away yet awhile," he went on. "Do you mind?"

"Not too much!"

She smiled up at him, laid a hand on his arm; kept it there all the while he was talking with the Returning Officer, with Beneforth—all the while they were making their slow way out of the Hall—all the while they stood under the opal lamps, and idiotic people cheered and groaned and hissed and waved flags and swung rattles and shouted for Sparlington to speak.

Sparlington didn't speak; he shrieked.

"Victory," shrieked Sparlington. "A people's victory. A victory over the lying Press of the capitalists. A victory for the downtrodden worker, for our Russian comrades, for our comrades the world over. A victory against British Imperialism—one victory out of many, let us hope, my friends."

Finally, his friends—and a hybrid-looking lot they were—lifted Paul Sparlington shoulder-high, and carried him off, howling "Laibour—Laibour—Laibour" as they went, to his car. Finally, freeing himself from her arm, John stepped forward to the edge of the steps. He, too, spoke; resonantly, surprising her a little by the vehemence behind his words; and after he had done speaking a great knot of men surged forward out of the darkness shouting, "Are we down-hearted? No!" "You stand again, sir," "Don't you leave us," "We'll put you in next time," "Thameside South will put you in next time or we'll know the reason why."

And after that—for a full half hour—everything was a blur, a blurring vision of crowds and rain and motor-cars before her eyes. Twice more John spoke—once from the steps of the Club and once from the window of his Committee Rooms. Each time, men shouted at him—shouted loud and long that he should stand again.

Then—all in a moment as it seemed—the thing was over; and John had followed her into her own car.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

§ 1

INSIDE Irene's own car, all was dark and superlatively comfortable. The very upholstery seemed to fondle her; the very whisper of the cylinders to re-assure her; to soothe away each doubt, each fear. This big silent disappointed husband was all hers again; and the mere thought sufficed to warm every flesh-particle of her body, every blood-drop in her veins.

"Cave-man," she whispered, snuggling to him. "My poor darling cave-man—why couldn't you have won?"

"Can't win every time," he answered, in his husky over-used voice. "It was a pretty good effort, really—knocking his majority down like that."

"Rather." She snuggled closer, pressing one knee against his. "John—you are a sportsman. More of a sportsman than Adrian. You should have heard *his* language when we knew the result."

"Poor old Adrian. He worked like a Trojan."

"No harder than you did."

"No. Possibly not."

John Masterson—biting on his bullet—fell silent. "Does he really love me?" she asked herself suddenly. "In the same way that I love him?"

"Do you?" she asked aloud. "Do you, cave-man?"

"Do I what?"

"Love me, of course." Her eyes widened at him in the darkness.

"Child—you know I do."

"Then that's all right."

Once more her knee pressed his; and with the pressure, it seemed to Masterson that she had taken away a little of his hurt. Alone—he knew—he could hardly have borne this defeat; could hardly have tolerated the memory of Paul Sparlington's eyes grinning watery hypocrisy as their hands met.

The car purred on, through Borough Bridge High Street,

through the Mile End Road, past Liverpool Street Station ; and now, fretted by his silence, Irene spoke again.

" Aren't you hungry ? I am. John—I had a brain-wave this morning. Supper in my new boudoir. All alone. Just you and I. No servants."

" That sounds splendid." With a wrench, Masterson tore his mind from its pre-occupations. " But I say, you won't mind if we stop at the Caxton."

" Why ? "

" Well, I'd like to know how things are going before we turn in."

" All right, darling." And Irene, in her turn, fell silent, thinking, " What's the use of minding ? Men are like that—children. We have to wait for them—to wait till they've done playing with their other toys."

The thought withdrew her from him ; but presently—divining his need of her—she laid a hand on his shoulder.

" Funny, aren't you ? " she said. " Haven't you had enough electioneering for one day ? "

" Very nearly. I shan't be more than a second at the Club."

His answer pleased her ; set her blood throbbing. After all, why shouldn't he have his harmless toys ?

So they made Queen Victoria Street, the Embankment, Northumberland Avenue, Trafalgar Square. All traffic was blocked in Trafalgar Square. Men and women had climbed the lions. Belated newsboys were shouting, electric signs flashing the results. Nelson's Column rose stark out of a dense mass of people who cheered, and sang, and waved flags or handkerchiefs. As John slid back the panel to give Palethorpe his directions, a middle-aged man in a bashed and sodden topper shouted through their windows, " Thirty gains—thirty gains already. Three cheers for the Lossiemouth Golf Club—and to blazes with Ramsay MacShuffle." She saw John's face, Palethorpe's, light at the unexpected news. What babies they were—and how alike—these men !

It took them ten good minutes to traverse the hundred yards from Cockspur Street to the Caxton ; and all through those ten minutes John and her chauffeur—the panel of the limousine open between them—were grinning like a couple of schoolboys on a spree.

" Us ex-service men may get a chance now, sir," declared Palethorpe. " Them others never could stand anyone who'd done his bit."

"Easy," said John. "We're not out of the wood yet."
Yes, babies—both of them—her husband and her chauffeur!

§ 2

Outside the Caxton, under the gas flare-torches, stood more men in sodden top-hats. Through the big windows--as John, still with that schoolboy grin on his face, went leaping up the steps—came crash after crash of frantic cheering.

"Does one's heart good to hear it, madam," said the excited Palethorpe. But Palethorpe's mistress, usually affable enough with her servants, vouchsafed him no answer.

Her blood was still throbbing—throbbing and throbbing with the sheer passionate anticipation of John. She wanted him; wanted him to hold her, close, very close, in his arms; wanted to feel his lips, his hands, all his body pressed against hers. And he—he wanted to know the results of this absurd election first!

The recognition of that fact stung her. Didn't he know, couldn't he understand—this big stupid man of hers—that women weren't like men; that, to them, their womanhood came first, all else nowhere; that neglected, dissatisfied, put in the second place, they turned inevitably to . . .?

That last thought shocked her a little—yet would not be suppressed. Thinking it, her blood ceased to throb; and a strange, cold fury replaced the passionate anticipation. She could feel her hands clenching in their suède; her ankle-muscles arching in their silk. "How long!" asked her fury. "How long?" And just as fury was asking that question someone tapped on the window of the car; and, looking up, she saw Rupert Starleigh.

Rupert—instinct told her—must have supped just a little too well. His wet hat was at a rakish angle; his overcoat, despite the weather, unbuttoned. A gold-crooked stick hung carelessly from his left arm. His lips smiled at her: so did his eyes, as he swung open the limousine door.

"Hell of a night," said Rupert. "Don't know how I've managed to keep sober. What are *you* doing here?"

"Waiting for John." Irene, too, managed a smile. "And I don't believe you are sober, Rupert."

"Sober as two judges," he assured her. "Where *is* John—inside—then I'll go and fetch him for you."

"No." It seemed to Irene that the words spoke themselves. "Don't do that. Stay here and talk to me."

"What—in this rain?"

"Well"—again the words seemed to speak themselves—"if you're very good, you can sit with me till John comes."

"And what'll John say when he finds me?"

It was the first flirtatious sentence that he—or any man—had spoken to her since her marriage; and just for a second, perpending the import of it, Irene hesitated. Then—fury urging—she said: "Don't be a damn fool, Rupert. Get in!"

He got in—rather gingerly, she noticed; and seating himself (her own seat happened to be away from the kerb) left the door through which he had entered, open. Palethorpe, jumping down, shut it; and remained standing in the rain.

"Cautious person, aren't you?" she chaffed. "What are you afraid of—me?"

"Naturally." His eyes, no longer smiling, stared hard into hers. "I'd be a mug if I weren't."

"Is that meant for a compliment?"

"Did I ever pay you compliments?"

His question, with its reference to the past, took her altogether aback; and for a whole minute she could find no answer. Her blood was throbbing once more—very strangely. She remembered Deauville—the lesson she had taught him then. Should she teach him another lesson? Was he still the experimentalist? Or did he really mean that he feared her? She felt that she must find that out, because . . . Oh, well, just because.

"No," she said suddenly, "you never paid me compliments. That was one of the reasons why I—why I liked you so much."

"*Did* you like me?" He was still staring at her; and meeting his stare she sensed, quite definitely, that wine had loosened some inhibition in him. "I doubt it. You don't like anybody really, you know. Except yourself!"

"Rupert!"

"My dear, don't get angry."

"I'm not angry."

"You are. And you were—just now—when you made me get into this car. I was a blithering idiot to get in—knowing you as well as I do."

"You don't know me a bit."

"Don't I?" Suddenly his tone changed. "Well—possibly I don't. But I know one side of you—and I know myself."

"Then"—her tone, too, changed; became subtly, almost consciously provocative—"you *don't* want to be friends with me?"

"Frankly—no!"

"Why?"

"Can't you guess?"

Again his question took her aback; again, for a full minute, she could find no answer. Then, speaking very slowly, more to herself than to him, she said, "It's going to make things a bit difficult—isn't it—if you're John's friend and not mine."

"Possibly," he admitted—and even as he made the admission both of them, seeing Palethorpe stiffen to attention, grew aware of John.

John—all excited with the news he had heard in the Club—came down the big steps three at a time; Rupert, slipping easily from his seat, met him mid-way of the pavement; and watching them shake hands, hearing Rupert's purposely loud, "Well met, old man—rotten luck you're getting pipped like that—I've just been telling Irene so," the woman in the car felt her sense of humour come uppermost.

Somehow, the little scene with Rupert had pleased her; taken away all her fury against John. After all, one couldn't be really furious with John—with dear, stupid, respectable John!

§ 3

All the same—once he had taken Rupert's place in the car and they were gliding the few yards to their home—John Masterson's political excitement, his words, "My dear—it's amazing, amazing—forty gains already—and Sir Martin Black's prophesying a landslide to-morrow," his whole attitude of mind seemed to John Masterson's wife (after that other excitement she had sensed in Rupert Starleigh) something of an anti-climax: so that she could not restrain—as he opened the front door of Carlton House Terrace and they went side-by-side up the big staircase to her boudoir—a slight feeling of disappointment, and with it a vague recrudescence of that rage which had chilled her while she waited for him outside the Club.

But the moment they entered her boudoir, that slight feeling of disappointment vanished. This room—finished—was all, and more than all, that she had planned. Its dim cornice-lights, refracting mellow gold from the groined stone of the ceiling to the mellow cedar of the wall-panels; the logs and fircones crackling on its brown-stone hearth; the big burnished piano on its music-dais; the deep orange velvet of window-hangings that toned to a nicety with the orange-and-black upholstery of its deep chairs and sofas; its clipped masterpiece of modern Savon-

nerie whose pattern could be almost felt under her thin-shod feet; its golden vases with their wealth of golden-brown chrysanthemums; its few intimate photographs and its few ivory ornaments and its many vari-coloured cushions; even the little supper-table which Belton, following her orders, had set out between the music-dais and the fire—all these were as caresses, as a lover's caresses, to her over-wrought nerves.

"It is a dream, isn't it?" she asked, standing just inside the doorway. "You are pleased with it? You are pleased with me for having ordered supper here?"

"Rather!" answered Masterson in that husky, over-used voice.

"Then kiss me."

He kissed her—as was his habit—on the right cheek; and after that they went upstairs together, slowly, to get tidy for their meal. Leaving him at the door of his dressing-room, she re-experienced—just for a moment—heart-misgiving, foreknowledge of disaster. "He should have kissed my lips," she thought, "not just my cheek." And with that thought there came to her—very vaguely as she let herself into their big *vieux-rose* bedchamber—another. Supposing—supposing she were married to Rupert and not to John?

The bedroom, however—in the same way as the boudoir—soothed her. Here, too—from the pale rugs on the shining floor to the faint blue painted clouds on the high ceiling—everything was a caress to the over-wrought nerves.

Coralie—also following her orders—had laid out a new tea-gown of filmy purple on the gold chair at the foot of her Louis Seize bed. She slipped off her day-frock; and, after bathing her face and arms with lavender-water in the adjoining bathroom, re-attired herself; changed her stockings; thrust her feet into purple slippers; called to John that she was ready, and made her way back to the boudoir.

There, having lit a cigarette, she settled herself to wait for him on the deep sofa which flanked the supper-table and the fire; and settling herself heard, ever so faintly, the hydraulic hiss of the lift mechanism, the click of the gate on the fourth floor. "The Millward woman," she thought, her lips pursing.

One of the "dollies" she had acquired in Deauville—a little Chinese Mandarin, pig-tailed, in a gold cloak with wide gold silk trousers—sat grotesquely at the far end of the sofa; and presently, discarding her cigarette half smoked, she drew this plaything towards her; took it on her knee, and started to caress it. As she did so, her lips unpursed; and after a while—her sensitive fingers

finding an almost hypnotic pleasure in their self-imposed task—she began to whisper.

"You're like a baby," she whispered, fondling the queer waxen face, the jointed limbs under the silk. "Like a little Chinese baby. Do you think I ought to let myself have a real baby? Would it be nice if I let myself have a real man-baby—a little John?"

But at that, her lips pursed again; her whispering ceased; and the semblance of a frown cut its triangle on her smooth forehead. Perturbed, she put the dollie away. She—Irene Masterson—didn't want babies. Babies would spoil everything; would only come between her and John.

"Dear John," she thought as he entered, quietly after his habit. "I don't want anyone, I don't want anything, except him."

He, too—she saw—had made something of a toilet, changing his coat and waistcoat for a frogged silk smoking-jacket, his muddy boots for patent leather house-shoes. The trifling attention pleased her, seemed to give a touch of intimacy to their meal.

"Such a time, you've been," she said, smiling on him. "But I'll forgive you, if you'll open the fizz."

He took the gold-foiled bottle from its silver cooler; and opening it, a mite clumsily, let a drop or two of the silver froth spill from her lace cloth to her Savonnerie carpet. She dipped a finger in the froth on the lace; rubbed a drop of it behind his right ear as they seated themselves.

"Just for luck," she said; and then, "That's not horrid of me, is it?"

"Horrid?" His wits, as they tried to follow hers, seemed laggardly. "No. Why?"

"Well—you haven't had much luck in your politics, have you?"

"No. I suppose not."

She helped him to some smoked salmon; watched him—appraisingly—while he drank his first glass of wine.

Meanwhile, John Masterson, all unconscious of her mood, felt his head aching a little, his body eager for sleep after the strain of the long day.

"Aren't you glad it's all over?" she went on; and he, after considering the question with his usual care, "In one way, I am. These last three weeks have been rather a grind."

"I'm glad, too. In more ways than one. I—I don't think I like politics, John."

"Nobody *could* like 'em!" He poured a little more wine; smiled at her over the rim of his glass. "But a chap's got to do his duty."

"Was that the only reason why you stood?"

"Of course."

His tone baffled her; seemed to tie her tongue. Silent, she offered him more food; and as they both ate, resumed her watching of him. "He loves me," she thought; "but after his own fashion. He loves me; but he doesn't understand. In love, we're still strangers to one another. But we mustn't go on being strangers to one another, because . . . because, one day, if we do, I shall fall out of love with him . . . like Cynthie with Tom." And sharply, as those thoughts traversed her mind, she remembered Rupert's, "I know one side of you—and I know myself." Yes! Rupert was right in that. He did know one side of her. And John didn't. Because John wasn't like Rupert. "Do I want him to be?" she asked herself.

The mental questions brought more memories—a queer confusion of them. Still watching John, she began to see—through him as it were—a medley of pictures; and behind each picture, quaintly distorted, a curious torch-shaped scarlet light which memory insisted to have been in Rupert's room at the Albany. "But it wasn't," she kept telling memory. "There was only one light—the little round alabaster one, on the little table by the fire."

To drive away the pictures, she made John pour her another full glass of wine; but the wine, though it dimmed the pictures, could not altogether dispel them from her brain. And now, in between those older pictures, flickered her last vision of Mary Millward, white-faced in the gallery of the Town Hall, her gloved fingers clutching the wooden rail as though they would squeeze out the very grain. And behind that picture, too, shone the torch-shaped light.

Then, all on a sudden, the pictures vanished, and she saw only John.

John had finished his supper; and was waiting for her to rise. Rising, she went over to him; put both her arms round his neck.

"Are you jealous of me?" she asked—and again, as in her little scene with Rupert, the words seemed to speak themselves.

"Jealous? Good Lord, no."

"But you ought to be."

"Why?"

"Because people who aren't jealous, aren't really in love."

"I can't see that."

"Can't you?" The contact of her smooth arm against his rugged cheek had fired her to a sudden recklessness; and in her recklessness she drew him up from the table, drew him down beside her on the deep cushioned settee. "Can't you, John? Can't you understand that I'm jealous—all the time—*of you?*"

"But you mustn't be." As always, he took her seriously.

"Why ever not?"

"Because love's the very opposite of jealousy. Because it's only when one doesn't love that one doesn't trust."

"Darling!"

The simplicity of his answer had thrilled her; and for quite a while she sat very silent, motionless, almost as a cat sits, her limbs relaxed, her lips closed, her green eyes staring now at him, now at the little grotesque Mandarin. It seemed to her that the Mandarin smiled at her, Orientally, from under its painted brows. "Aren't you glad," smiled the Mandarin, perched on his big black cushion, "aren't you terribly glad to have married that sort of a man?" And yet, was any man really that sort of a man? Was any man really to be trusted—with other women—with women, for instance, whose emotions pulled the very blood from their faces at the mere anticipation of his political defeat?

And on that—seeing, once again, her picture of Mary Millward and of the curious torch-shaped scarlet light—there came to Irene Masterson the conviction, reasonless perhaps but very definite, that the Millward woman must be in love, either consciously or unconsciously, with John.

The conviction, curiously enough, did not surprise; did not even anger her. It was as though she had always known this thing; always felt the need of being on her guard against it. "And I must go on being on my guard," she told herself. "I mustn't let John even dream . . ." Then, still motionless, she began to speak.

"I've been thinking, John," she began, "about this establishment of ours. It really is rather awful, isn't it? Do you know we've got forty servants?"

"As many as that?" The words were absent-minded.

"At least as many as that." She moved now, stretching out a hand, laying it on his arm. "And more at Mastersleigh. Don't you agree that it's too many?"

"Yes." The monosyllable was still absent-minded. "I suppose it is. But I don't see how you can do with less. Besides, with all this unemployment——"

"Oh, there's no unemployment among that class."

She broke off there, wondering how best to reach her purpose; and to John Masterson it seemed—just for one infinitesimal moment—as though the tiny hand on his arm were trembling. "Are the servants worrying her?" he thought. "Is that why she wants some of them to go?"

But when she next spoke he could detect no trace of worry in the calm voice.

"I'm going to cut down," she said resolutely. "Belton really doesn't need four footmen. Any more than Alphonse needs three vegetable maids. I don't think we want a chef at all. A cook would be far better. And then I could do the housekeeping—the books and all that—myself."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really." She smiled at him, wide-eyed, innocent—to his unseeing eyes—as any kitten. "You see, I'm tired of being a useless little person, John—tired of being only a spender. However rich we are, it's no good *wasting* money, is it?"

"Naturally not."

"And you"—for another infinitesimal second he imagined that her hand must be trembling—"you oughtn't to waste money either. If I do take on the housekeeping, you—you won't need three secretaries."

"You mean . . ."

"I mean"—the hand *was* trembling now, and the voice a good semitone above its normal—"I mean that you won't need Miss Millward."

Irene, her piece spoken, withdrew her hand; and subsided again, cat-like, among her deep cushions. Eyeing her, John Masterson was conscious of no emotion save the purest astonishment. Didn't this child-wife of his understand that he only employed Lonsdale as a ledger-clerk, Ivor only as a family duty? Or had she taken a spite against Mary Millward—as she had taken a spite against Parker, against Ellison, against various others of his old pre-marriage staff? "But that's quite impossible," he thought.

"Well," she prompted. "Well? Don't you think I'm right?"

She looked so lovely, so entirely guileless as she lay there among her cushions that, for an appreciable moment of time, the weakness in him voted for compromise. Why not humour her—promise to consider the suggestion—trust that, by the morning, she would forget?

Forgetfulness, however, was not Irene's way; and the weak moment passed, as he said, all his natural honesty urging him

to be quite frank with her, " I'm afraid I don't. Miss Millward's absolutely invaluable."

Silence followed; and in that silence Irene grew aware, bitingly, of hatred. " Invaluable ! " she thought. " Invaluable ! How dare he use that word ! No woman ought to be invaluable to him—except me." And so thinking she remembered how, at their very first meeting, practically in their very first conversation, he had spoken about this woman, spoken of her almost as one peaks of a friend.

" Nobody's absolutely invaluable," she said at last ; and fell silent again, striving—as she had never before striven—for self-control.

" Naturally." Masterson smiled one of his slowest, most irritating smiles. " The world couldn't go on if they were."

" Then why do you say Miss Millward is ? "

" My dear, I was only speaking figuratively."

" Figuratively ! "

For the third time silence lengthened between them. Then—honesty still urging—Masterson started to explain. Ivor was the best of good fellows—explained Masterson—but, of course, he couldn't quite manage things on his own. And Lonsdale hadn't been engaged to do correspondence. *He*, really, was Carfax's man. And besides—all that apart—Miss Millward did lots of other jobs. . . .

" What jobs ? " interrupted Irene.

" Well—take this political business."

" But that's over."

" And then there's Humblestone Street."

" Can't Mr. Aubreystone attend to that ? "

" Only to one side of it—the actual building."

Irene, asking no further questions, heard the explanation out. All the while, rage, hatred, half a-dozen scarcely understood emotions were seething in her. All the while—despite the emotions—instinct told her to be on her guard. " I mustn't let him find out," she kept repeating to herself. " I mustn't even let him dream *why* I want the woman to go."

" So you see," he ended ; " Miss Millward really isn't an extravagance at all. Quite apart from the housekeeping side of her work, she's a necessity."

" A necessity." The word, the tone, his whole attitude appeared so final that for many, many seconds after he had spoken Irene had to avert her eyes from him lest he should see the truth. Always before, he had yielded to her lightest whimsy. Always before—and almost without asking for it—

she had got her own way. Wasn't she to have her own way now?

"If he loves me," went on her thoughts, "if he loves me, I can make him yield."

Yet even so, she could not bring herself to face him; and when, finally, she did speak, her eyes were still averted, on the Mandarin's face and not on his. It seemed to her that the Mandarin was grinning at her, Orientally, as she began to speak.

"John," she began—and the word was forced, a choke of sheer fury in her working throat; "John—listen to me. I've—I've got nothing against Miss Millward. I—I like her. But I don't want you to keep her. She—she can't really be a necessity. Nobody is. You—you said so yourself. Just now. John—listen. If you must have somebody besides Ivor—I'd, I'd be silly to object. Only—only don't let it be Miss Millward, because—because . . ."

But on that, before she could force another word to her lips, John Masterson had risen from her; and as he rose she was aware, flashingly, of annoyance in him, of a stubbornness that matched—and over-matched—her own.

"You're being unreasonable," he said. "And you're asking me to do something that isn't fair. I can't do anything that isn't fair—even to please you."

"You don't mean"—her eyes, wrenching themselves from the Mandarin, darted one covert glance up to his—"that you can't. You mean that you won't."

"Precisely."

This time his word—every instinct told her—*was* final; and mentally repeating it as she, too, rose, so that they faced one another, not a yard separating them, by the untidy supper-table in front of the simmering fire, she could have struck him with her clenching hands.

To-night, she had planned to console this man—to give herself to him, as she had never before given herself, recklessly, with no inhibitions, with no pruderies. To-night, she had planned to shew this man—as she had never before shewn him—how she was not the child he imagined her, but a woman, a woman all passionate; a woman he could love till the love-lust in him was utterly spent. To-night—and barely an hour back—every particle of flesh in her body, every drop of blood in her veins, had been throbbing for this man; craving for him; craving to know itself love-satiate and spent against his body, held and close-held in the fervour of his arms. And now—now the flesh, the very blood in her body, was ice-bound, frozen, because . . .

because of this other woman, because of this one thing he had denied.

"Love?" she thought. "What does *he* know of love? He, with his talk of fairness. He, with his, 'Precisely.' He, with his denial."

And even while those thoughts were chill in her brain, he said, making a movement towards her, stooping to kiss her on the right cheek, "I've had a pretty long day, Irene. And I've got a bit of a headache. You won't mind—will you?—if I turn in."

§ 4

He had kissed her—and somehow she had borne with his kissing. He had gone from her—and somehow she had borne that he should go. She remembered how, as the cedar door closed under his steady hand, she had wanted to scream after him, "Come back, John. You shan't leave me down here. Come back!" But every other memory of that last moment had been wiped from her mind.

She was still standing where he had left her; tense; every muscle in her a separate misery; between the untidy supper-table and the simmering fire. The simmering of the fire fretted but could not warm her. Nothing could warm her, nothing drive out this agony, this blood-chill in her ice-bound veins. All her functions seemed to have deserted her. She could only stare—stare and stare about this room which had once been all, and more than all, she had planned for her delight.

There was no delight any more—only misery. She hated this room; hated herself; hated—with a hatred she knew to be half-maniacal—him.

Presently—one by one—her functions began to come back. As they did so, she was aware of that flower which had opened, right inside her body, on the night of Adrian's speech. The flower was still open, and from it dripped poison—a poison of self-knowledge, terrifying to the self-esteem. Stooping to the table, she examined the champagne bottle; saw that there was still wine in it; tilted the wine into her glass; drank.

The drink warmed her a little; took away some of her agony, a little of her terror of the flower. Hands trembling, she stooped for the cigarette-box on the table; found matches; lit herself a cigarette. Flinging her match into the fire, she perceived the dollie.

The Mandarin-dollie, perched on his black cushion, was still

grinning at her. It seemed to her, as she watched him through the cigarette smoke, that he knew everything about her; that he was glad, disgustingly and Orientally glad, that she should have been so discomforted. "You beast," she thought. "You nasty yellow-looking beast. How dare you grin?" But the yellow dollie went on grinning.

At last—hardly knowing what she did, or what impulses moved her to the doing—she flung her half-smoked cigarette away; and, stretching out a hand to grasp the dollie by its loose coat, lifted it from its cushion; lifted it till its slitty eyes were level with her own. Her own eyes were wide open—cold—purposeful—concentrated as a cat's.

She began to play with the dollie—cruelly—as a cat plays with a bird. The touch of the silk, of the wax limbs under the silk, excited her fingers. Her fingers began tearing—tearing away the loose coat, the wide trousers, the little black silk boots. Her fingers ripped the coat, the trousers, the little black silk boots to shreds; flung them on to the fire.

The dollie's limbs were naked now; and their very nakedness enraged her. She knew that she must destroy them—destroy all that epicene pink body, all that epicene yellow head. She began plucking at the head; plucked off the silk cap, the pig-tail; flung them, too, on to the fire.

Then, with one convulsive movement, she pitched the naked body to the simmering wood; watched the wax melt; watched it sizzle; watched it pour down—white and viscous—on her brown-stone hearth.

As the wax spread, as it coagulated, rage seemed to leave her. Calm again, she lit herself another cigarette; moved from the fireplace, and began to wander—very slowly—up and down the room. At the far end of the room, on a little occasional table by a little alabaster lamp, stood a photograph of Rupert Starleigh.

She clicked on the lamp, and examined the photograph—examined it for a long time. The lips of the photograph fascinated her. So did the hands. . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY

§ 1

In every man's and in every woman's life-story there are periods when all consecutive thought-processes seem suspended; all action a mere involuntary reflex of the subconscious mind.

Such a period—three months all told—now occurs in the joint life-stories of John Masterson and his wife, Irene. They become, during this time, just automata; creatures of routine creatures unquarrelling; but a couple, not a pair. One can see them well, perhaps, as two ships drifting apart over some wide sea; better still, as two nations, the one pacific, the other secretly arming for war.

Yet since—though thought may be suspended and action become a mere reflex of the subconscious feelings—the human character is continually at its development, one may note, during these three months, a distinct change, a distinctive ripening in both their personalities.

To take Irene first. In her—right away from that moment when she had wanted to scream, "Come back, John. You shan't leave me here. Come back"—had been bred resentment. And under the spell of that resentment she became (one uses Adrian's own word, because Adrian was the first to sense her psychological deterioration) "wifty"; a woman of reasonless moods, of reasonless impulses; a woman of tantrum, rather than a woman of temperament; alternating—though never without that especial charm which distinguished her from her fellows—between fits of the most superlative depression and fits of the most superlative joy.

Contemporary thought compares such women with butterflies. But in Irene's case the whirring movement of the hawk-moth provides an apter simile. It seemed—to those who watched her most carefully during these three months of her existence—as though she were never still. An hour's ride, an hour's motor run, an hour in the covered tennis court at Dulwich, an hour's bridge,

a cocktail hour, an hour or two's theatreing, an hour or two's dancing, with perhaps half-an-hour's flirtation interspersed here and there among the twenty-four—these and their like made up the sum total of her days.

So far, however, Irene's flirtations were innocent—mere exercises in power. If, occasionally, the objectives of that power—and more particularly one objective, Rupert Starleigh—resented it; if, occasionally, they misunderstood it; if, very occasionally, the throb of a vein on a masculine forehead, the warmth of the blood in a masculine hand, or the kindle of passion-light in a masculine eye—more particularly in those gray eyes which were Rupert Starleigh's—evoked an equal throb, an equal warmth, an equal light in her own; John Masterson's wife remained, nevertheless, very resolute in bodily, if not in spiritual, allegiance to her John.

§ 2

And now, take John!

In him—once her maintained silence on the subject had made it apparent that Irene did not intend to renew her suggestion that he should dismiss Mary Millward—was no resentment, not even a suspicion of the truth. Sex-foolish, unpsychological, continually blinded by the rose-red curtain (and by sheer ingrained loyalty!), he perceived hardly a change—and certainly no sign of deterioration—in the woman who was his wife. Still with his fixed idea, still regarding her as less the woman than the child, he only doubted—and that only on occasions—his ability to make her happy. And, reacting to those occasional doubts, he schooled himself, for the most part, to physical restraint.

The reason for this partial restraint, his mind did not attempt to formulate. It merely seemed to him—semi-consciously—that youth, mated as Irene's, had the right to that physical sacrifice.

"I mustn't worry her," represents his thoughts, insofar as he had any on such a subject—and possibly the gentlehood in him.

But though these months brought no resentment to Masterson, they did bring him, very definitely, back to his old hatred against over-much money.

Nowadays his money seemed more than ever a burden. Except for the knowledge that his millions gave Irene pleasure, he could get no joy out of them. Even his first big shoot at Mastersleigh bored him a little. He had had so much more sport

when he bagged his last leopard! Even when The Animal, now entered for the National, romped home at Newbury, he got no thrill from the victory. It had been so much more fun to win a pony race at Addis Ababa!

Every once in a while, too—Irene or no Irene—he had the blind impulse to rid himself of his burden; and, when this impulse was on him, he would paralyze the obsequious Menelik by demanding his oldest suit, his oldest boots—and so attired, sally forth, alone except for Martinet, from the champagne-flowing, menial-haunted opulence of Carlton House Terrace to drink porter and eat steak in one of those humble chop-houses which a man, tramping here and there, can still find in many a side-street of this over-civilized London. And almost the first of these tramps—on a gray day towards the end of November—carried Masterson's feet back, willy nilly, to Thameside South.

Thameside South's politics—since the election landslide of Sir Martin Black's prophecy—had lost most of their savour. But Thameside South's poverty—as re-seen that day—set his social conscience aching anew.

His steak eaten—chance decreed it should be eaten at the Blue Boar, which abuts on the river, bringing, to share his pot-house cubicle and his beer-stained table, one of those very mufflered men who had told him, a month back, "We don't 'old with your politics, sir. But we know you'll tell us the truth"—he took the opportunity of visiting Humblestone Street.

His first sight of Humblestone Street cheered him a little. Beyond the gin-palace and the pawn-shop the framework of Aubreystone's new building already lifted a black spider's web of steel against the gray of the sky; and, regarding that spider's web, his mind—re-vibrant to its key-desire for serving the less fortunate of his fellow creatures—took pleasure in the thought of those things which capital alone could accomplish for the poor.

But when darkness fell, and work ceased on the spider's web, and the lights of the gin-palace began their flaring, pleasure left him; and in its place there came that identical mood of despairful brooding he had experienced, nearly a year back now, as he rode home—to drum-beat and hyena-snarl and lion-roaring—across the dusty polo-ground on the Ethiopian plains.

England was as Ethiopia. These London slum-dwellers, however much a man might spend or labour for them, would not change their essential characteristics. The work of one architect, the erection of one model dwelling, the winning of one—even of a dozen—election-battles, would not rouse these hopeless

men, these slatternly women, to any sense of communal responsibility. Idle by instinct, diseased, vicious and drunken by inheritance, they would always prefer the dung-heap to the mountain-top; breeding and multiplying, as vermin breed and multiply, till Nature—greatest of all surgeons—cut away the necrosis of them from her general tissues.

That mood, however, passed, as his other; and with its passing there came to John Masterson, tramping back, fair heel-and-toe, at four and a half miles an hour along the Embankment, the beginnings of a great purpose.

§ 3

Exactly what that great purpose of John Masterson's planned, how it grew on him, the manifold obstacles it encountered, its many failures, its few successes, the bright hope, and the dull hopelessness, and the final heart-break of it—need not be told here. Here, need only be related how, by one of the mysteries which are human recollection, certain words were clear—and star-clear—in his travailing mind when he returned, tired from his tramping, to his luxurious home. For those words—"Wouldn't it be better to build these dwellings on an economic basis? Then, if they were a success, you could build others—go on building—be of some real constructive use,"—crystallized an entire issue: so that, in them, at long last he seemed to have re-discovered the one thing which may make a rich man's life worth living, Selfless Work.

Nor will you find any record of that work scrolled in bronze on a tablet in the Council Chamber of the Borough Bridge Town Hall; nor any paragraph about it in the newspapers of the period; nor—search them how you will—any line thereof in the books of the Thameside South Municipality. Because only the enduring stones of Humblestone Street, and sundry frontages of new brick-and-mortar in the meaner alleys beyond, bear on this part of the tale; and they only on the material part of it, not on any of those hopes which were clear—and star-clear—to the woman behind this dream, as she had been in the forefront of an earlier, Mary Millward.

He told her little. He loved her not at all. Her very words—once the inspiration of them had served its purpose—slipped back into the dim recesses of his inmost mind. Yet, throughout these months of his existence, and for many a weary month thereafter, she, and she alone, sees this John Masterson clearly; sees him for one who, hounded by those subconscious feelings

whose only reflex, and that involuntary, is action, seeks, in the hearts of men whom his work may benefit, that spiritual allegiance which another woman denies.

Yet even so; even though she, and she alone—seeing him imposed upon, as most men impose upon reformers, seeing him thwarted, as all reformers are thwarted, seeing him hurt, as all such are hurt, by the lies they encounter, and by the ingratitude, and by the meanness of folk and by their misunderstanding—realizes both the dream and the lovableness of the dreamer, Mary Millward is still far from realizing those feelings which are her inmost self.

Lonely, as only women in her position can be lonely; interested, as only women in her position can be interested, commonsensible (again the word is Rose's), as only one sprung from the best of the English working-classes can be commonsensible, to all those material difficulties which one who would solve even a fraction of London's housing-problem must needs encounter on his way—it remains a curious fact that neither the loneliness, nor the interest, nor even the commonsense can warm her till the time decreed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

§ 1

READ now of Mary Millward!

Telegrams, ever since she came to Carlton House Terrace, had always been rare. Her employer's wife was a telephoner by instinct; her employer, on those days when a shoot or a gallop with the hounds or a race-meeting absented him, did not communicate at all. Accordingly, on that cold February morning when Belton's hall-boy handed his little salver across her desk, the orange envelope with its superscription, "Millward—care Masterson—18a, Carlton House Terrace," already represented something of a shock.

Her fingers hesitated before they dipped into that envelope. But once she had read the words of the telegram, there was no more hesitancy, only decision in her blue eyes.

Quietly she wrote her answer, gave it to the hall-boy, rose from her desk, tidied her papers, slid the revolving shutter home, locked up, and went in to Ivor. Quietly she told Ivor—who glanced up, a mite startled at her entrance, from the Fellowship accounts he was still keeping, "I've just had a wire from Mr. Withers. My mother is dangerously ill. Would you mind explaining to Mr. Masterson as soon as he gets back?" Quietly she confirmed her memory of the one decent train to Lipstone in Lonsdale's A.B.C.; went to her room; packed; ordered a taxi, and set out for Waterloo.

So far, her actions had been automatic. But once she had caught her train; once her train was hurrying into Hampshire, introspection had its way with her anxious mind.

Only crisis—her knowledge of the man told her—could have provoked old Tom to such a telegram; and, facing the possibilities of crisis, she could not avoid the certainty that she had never really loved this mother of hers; because always, even from babyhood, she had seen the faults in her; judging her, as only children can.

"She's been a responsibility," thought Mary Millward.

And yet, supposing that this responsibility were to be lifted from her shoulders? What then?

The mental questions troubled her; knit her brows to perplexity.

"Am I as hard as that?" went on her thoughts. "Don't I really care?"

And presently, other questions came to harry her mind.

Remembering that other telegram—that awful War Office telegram—with its soulless, heart-rending news of her father's death; remembering how, from that day to this, she had given up everything so that she might protect, and make provision for, the querulous, unreasoning, old-before-her-time woman who had never given her anything except birth; she asked herself—over and over and over again as the train sped onwards: "Isn't that love—service?"

And yet, had that service been love? Hadn't it been given out of duty and not out of affection; out of that self-same sense of duty which was forcing her—even now—to remember a different duty: the glance which Ivor Carslake had given her as he looked up from his accounts, a letter she had left unanswered, a hundred-and-one other of those trivial details which made up her daily round at Carlton House Terrace.

And, "Perhaps I can't love anyone in the same way I loved father," concluded her introspection, as she lifted her suitcase from the rack.

Some minds are premonitious of disaster; and hers—the moment she stepped out of her third-class carriage—warned her of the worst. Old Tom was waiting for her by the little railway bookstall; and as they met, it needed no second glance, no word from his lips, hardly the pressure of his hand to tell her the numbing truth.

"I'm too late," she said—and old Tom never forgot the schooled calm, the quiet dignity of her. "Don't try and explain anything here."

He noticed, when they passed through the gate, that she did not have to fumble for her ticket. He noticed, as he handed her into his waiting dog-cart, that her foot was quite steady on the iron step. He noticed, almost before he had drawn his whip-lash across Thunder's back, that her face wore the same look Handsome Jack's had worn on a day—years ago—when they had buried one of their school-chums.

"You can tell me now," she said, once they were away. "You see, I can't quite understand. She wrote me only the day before yesterday—saying she was well."

He told her what he knew, very simply, "She died in her sleep—of heart-failure—Doctor Cole has given a certificate—I didn't like to telegraph more than I did"; and after that, all the short road to the churchyard wall and the war memorial, she sat silent, her eyes between Thunder's ears, her gloved hands folded on her little suitcase, her shoulders squared as Handsome Jack's had been squared—on that day in the long-ago nineties.

"Shall I come in with you?" he asked, when they reached the red house with its drawn red blinds, and the girl, Marjorie, her eyes swollen with weeping, ran out to meet them.

"No," she answered, still speaking with that same schooled calm, that same quiet dignity. "No. Please don't come in."

So old Tom, who had always obeyed her whimsies, lifted his hat—and drove away.

§ 2

For a full minute after old Tom's horse had gone clip-clopping down the muddy street, Mary Millward—alone with her mother's servant-girl in the gloom of the inner hall—stood thinking, very gratefully, of his friendship. He was one of Nature's noblemen, was old Tom; one who understood, instinctively, that sorrow needs its solitude; that she, Mary Millward, needed solitude now.

"Wait for me," she told Marjorie; and, after the girl, her apron at her eyes, had gone slowly towards the kitchen, began to make her way, also slowly, up the carved stairs towards the door of her mother's room.

The door was closed; and for a moment, still numb with the first shock of actual bereavement, she hesitated to open it. "She was a responsibility," repeated her mind in that moment of hesitation. "So how can you be sorry—now that she's gone?"

Then, hesitant no longer, she set her fingers to the door-handle; turned it, and went in.

She had anticipated death's chill, death's misery; but as she entered that square exquisitely proportioned room, as she closed the door behind her, and approached the big tester bed of her father's own carving, a glint of sun percolated through the drawn blinds; and by its warm light she saw, hardly crediting the sight, only death's majesty, only his kindliness.

Nothing of querulousness remained to the blind face which lay so peacefully among its pillows. Death had smoothed all querulousness away. Smoothed away, too, all those tell-tale wrinkles which had made this mother old before her time.

"She looks almost beautiful," thought Mary Millward; and

so thinking stood for a long, long moment, pondering the past.

Always—in the past—she had marvelled at her father's love for this woman, at his patience with her, and his tolerance of her foibles. But now, all suddenly, it seemed as though she understood. It must have been beauty which had first drawn the artist in her father to this woman; the memory of that beauty which had kept him loving to the end.

"Yet his end was duty," remembered Mary Millward; and with that, seemed to see a vision of him.

Her father, as she saw him in her vision, still lived. He stood in a place of fear. There was blood in that place, and mud, and blinding smoke, and the stench of cordite. But neither the blood, nor the mud, nor the smoke, nor the stench of cordite could make him afraid. He had squared his shoulders; his blue eyes were sullen with resolution. In one hand, he gripped a rifle; in the other, a great blade of shining steel. She saw him fix the steel to the rifle-muzzle; saw him clamber forward from that place of fear; and knew, instinctively, that she was seeing him as he had been when he went to his death.

Then the vision passed, and she was alone with her new dead —alone in this quiet room where the pleasant village-noises scarcely penetrated through the drawn blinds and the bolted windows.

Her new dead drew her towards its pillows, and as she stooped above those pillows, understanding widened. What if the remembered beauty of this dead woman had been her father's main prompting to duty? What if that memory—rather than the duty-sense—had squared his shoulders and steeled his eyes when he clambered out of the trench.

"He loved her," thought Mary Millward. "At the end as at the beginning. But I—I never loved her at all."

The thought overwhelmed her; and after a while, hardly knowing what she did, she—who had no religion—knelt her down by the bedside and began to pray, voicelessly to whatever gods there were, that she, too, might know love towards this dead, that her heart might be softened and its judgments pass from it.

And gradually, as she prayed, it seemed to her that the judgments did pass; that memory—as some drought-parched garden —grew green with the first Spring of forgiveness. She could pity now—not criticize—all those trifling faults which had so roused her antagonism: the silly little snobberies, the silly little vanities, the silly little affectations. For none of these had been bred of unkindliness, but only of ill-health, of a feeble soul.

"She was weak," decided Mary Millward, rising from her knees. "Father and I were strong. I ought to have loved her, as father may have, for her very weaknesses. But I couldn't. I'm only learning to love her now."

For now—now that this one feeble soul whom duty had bade her protect and make provision for, was gone beyond the service of her duty—Mary Millward knew what it is to be more than lonely, to be utterly alone.

"You were all I had," she whispered, as she turned her from the death-chamber. "And I never knew. I never knew."

§ 3

If Mary Millward had been a weaker woman, if she could have allowed herself the luxury of tears, of self-pity or of remorse, it is possible that those two long days—and longer nights—at Lipstone might have been less dreary. But being the woman she was, it seemed to her—all through those dreadful hours while her dead mother slept on the bed of her dead father's carving—as though her heart-wound could never close.

Night and day the sense of her aloneness grew; stabbing her as her eyes closed for sleep; stabbing her when they opened again, sleepless, to face the gray of the dawn. The people who came to condole with her—people she had known since childhood—were only as ghosts against the pall of her solitude. The letters she received only made her heart ache the more.

"None of these people liked mother," she knew. "None of them really mind her being dead. Nobody ever loved her except father. Not even I."

In those days, not even Masterson's words could bring her any comfort: though he wrote, with his own hand, the moment the news reached him, a letter which laid no stress on sorrow, but only told her not to worry about her work, and if need be, to take a holiday before she came back.

Yet that particular letter, alone among them all, she preserved; and though nothing of emotion shewed in her reply—in the little dutiful note which began, "I write to thank you for your sympathy," and ended, "I shall return to Carlton House Terrace immediately after the funeral"—could not help being aware, as she locked it away in her worn writing-case, of the tiniest heart-throb, of the tiniest, shyest certainty that this man, could she but have explained to him, would have understood.

And during the funeral, too—all through the service itself and

all through that dreadful twenty minutes thereafter while she, and old Tom, and a score of villagers she had known since childhood stood under dripping umbrellas by the dripping grave—some of her thoughts were with Masterson. So that when the grave closed ; when old Tom insisted on accompanying her back to the house, her mind—for all its misery—formulated something of a comparison. They were both gentlemen, these two. In neither was aught but kindness, aught but understanding. And one of them—the one actually at her side—loved her ; had loved her for many years now, dumbly, with hardly a hope of return.

" Poor Tom," she thought, when they went in together, she first and he following. And again, " Poor me."

To both of them this house, now that the dead had gone out of it and the blinds were up again, seemed curiously empty, curiously cold. They were glad of the fire which Marjorie had lit for them in the dining-room ; glad of the warm meal she hurried to prepare.

" You'll be selling the place, I expect," said Tom, as they sat down to eat.

" I suppose so," answered Mary.

She looked singularly beautiful, sitting there, hatless, in the black simplicity of her mourning frock. Yet about all her beauty there was a weariness. And to old Tom, loving her, it seemed his simple duty to distract her from weariness ; to talk easily about easy things—about the brood-mares he was persuading Masterson to buy, and The Animal's last race, and the hopes he had of him for the National.

" Mister John's a good owner," said old Tom suddenly. " Gives one a free hand. But I sometimes wonder whether his heart's in the game—whether he isn't keener on these reforms of his, on his model dwellings and all that, than on his racing. What do you think about it, Mary ? "

" I think you're right," answered Mary—and fell silent, considering the future. What could the future hold for her ? Only a blank. She would go back to Carlton House Terrace. Take up her duties again. Go on doing duties. Till she, too, died.

And yet, wasn't that view just foolishness ? Mightn't life—free of responsibility—hold out something more than just duty ?

The dim ideas—first stirrings of a mind no longer quite numb with misery—surprised her ; and, their meal over, she wished that old Tom would go. She wanted solitude again ; wanted to take her thoughts in hand. But old Tom shewed no signs of going. He stayed on, not quite so talkative, a little fidgety ; until—by

the time that Marjorie, coming in to clear the dishes, adjourned them to the drawing-room—he, too, fell silent.

She tried—guessing what that silence might presage—to draw him out of it. Her efforts, however, were of no avail. When she questioned him, he answered only with monosyllables. When she forbore to question, his gray eyes either searched her face from the depths of his big chair, or, averting themselves, stared gloomily into the fire. She began to feel uncomfortable; wished again that he would go.

At last, he seemed to make up his mind about something, and began to speak.

"How much longer are you going to be here?" he asked.

"Only till to-morrow morning."

"You're going back permanently?"

"Of course. What else is there to do?"

On that, his eyes sought hers for a moment; and she realized, instantaneously, that she had made a mistake.

"There's one other thing you could do," he began abruptly. "Won't you take just a few days off? Stay on here?"

He paused, constraining her to ask him:

"Why should I stay down here?"

"Just to think the other thing over."

He paused again; but this time she knew better than to prompt him. Behind his eyes was purpose; behind hers, doubt. Twice before, he had asked her to marry him. She had laughed then. Would she laugh now?

"I suppose I'm an old fool, Mary," he went on. "But I haven't given up hope yet. Why go back to work? I love you —even if you don't love me. And I could give you a good home."

"I know you could, Tom," said Mary Millward—and there was no laughter in her voice. "It isn't that."

"I'd do my best to make you happy."

"You always have, Tom. It isn't that either."

"Then what is it?"

"I wish I knew."

For a long while, he said no more; and all that while it seemed to Mary Millward as though—for the first time in all her years—her mind was wavering. Wouldn't she be happier married? Wouldn't marriage to this gentle man—even though she could not bring herself to more than a calm affection for him—take away that curse of loneliness which was her life?

He was speaking again, pleading with her.

"Don't say, No, again, Mary. Promise you'll think it over. I'm not trying to press you. But you've been working all your

life—ever since you were a little girl in pig-tails. Isn't it time you gave up working? I'm oldish—but I'd know how to take care of you. It is the age that worries you most, isn't it?"

"Don't think that, Tom." Mary spoke very quietly, still in that same schooled, dignified voice. "I'm twenty-nine—nearly thirty, to be accurate. So the age isn't the obstacle."

"Then what is the obstacle?" As he spoke, old Tom rose from his chair. "Tell me—and we'll get over it. Is it that I'm not good enough for you? *I* know that—just as I know that you're ten thousand times too good for me. But you're all alone in the world, my dear, and when a woman's all alone in the world——"

"She's better married, eh?" Mary's interruption was still spoken very quietly. Her eyes had lifted themselves to his. Her white hands lay unmoving on the black silk of her lap.

"I didn't quite mean that, dear."

"Didn't you? Why not? If you had meant it, you'd have been perfectly right."

"Then"—hope strengthened the trainer's voice—"you won't say, No. You will think it over?"

She *was* thinking it over, thinking her very hardest what would be best to do; and perhaps—had he been just a little more ardent—he might have been able, in that one moment, to make her marry him. But his love for her, with the efflux of years, had lost its passion. It remained dumb now; nor did it dare—while she, her mind still wavering, sat hesitant, the white fingers locking and interlocking on her lap—to touch even so much as the black silk at her shoulder.

So the moment passed: and presently she, too, rose, saying, "You said you were a fool, Tom. But it's I who am foolish. I know all that you have to offer me. But I can't take it. Don't press me to tell you why. Because I can't understand why. I can't understand myself at all, these days. When I think of myself, I seem to be all sorts of women. But one sort of woman—I'm quite sure—I never could be: the sort of woman who . . . who marries without love."

And those words—old Tom realized—were final: extinguishers of hope.

§4

Once again Thunder's hoofs had gone clip-clopping down the muddy street. Once again—this time without even Marjorie—

Mary Millward stood alone in the inner hall. Once again, very slowly, she made her way up the carved stairs into that square, exquisitely-proportioned room.

Nothing in that room told, any longer, of death. Its bed was smoothed; empty. No blinds hid its bare panes. But to-day, through those bare panes, percolated never a gleam of sunlight. Without—though the rain had lifted—everything was gray.

And in Mary's heart, too, was a grayness; a grayness of despair.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

§ 1

It was a curiously altered, curiously chastened Mary Millward who—fairly early next day—paid the girl, Marjorie, her wages; locked up the house, and stepped into the ramshackle Morris-Cowley which conveys the Lipstone villagers to their station.

Last night—for the first time since that soulless telegram had told of her father's death in action—she had cried; and this morning—though outwardly at her calmest—she still knew the desire for tears. Her mood was a mood of feebleness. She no longer wanted to face life—as she and her father always had faced it—boldly, with the shoulders squared and the eyes resolute.

"What's the matter with me?" she thought, as her conveyance started on its way. "What's troubling me? I've never been like this before!"

But the thing which happened to be troubling Mary Millward that morning defied analysis; and by the time she reached the station she could only rejoice in the knowledge that in two more hours—three at the most—the accumulation of business she would be sure to encounter at Carlton House Terrace would put her, temporarily at any rate, beyond the reach of introspection.

Nevertheless, and all the way up to Town, her mood of feebleness—though she tried her best to wrestle with it—would not abate; and presently, blent with that mood, came another —Regret.

For the first time since her father's death, she was free of all responsibilities save the responsibility of earning her own livelihood. But this freedom had come too late. There was no lightness in it; no joyousness; no more feeling of youth.

"I'm old," she kept telling herself. "I'm thirty."

She tried to tell herself that thirty was no age for a modern woman; but without avail. Between twenty and thirty lay the joyous years. And she, Mary Millward, had lost those years—bartered them for no pottage. The very sun-gleams across the

fields that rattled past her windows ; that sense, not yet sight, of Spring on the hurrying hedgerows, assured her so. " Your spring-time ! " they seemed to say. " Lost ! "

Gradually, however—as fields and hedgerows vanished, and London sprang grimy into view—Mary Millward's natural commonsense re-asserted itself ; and by the time she reached Waterloo little more than the memory of those two moods remained.

Stepping from her carriage, disdaining a porter's offer to carry her little suitcase, finding herself a taxi, telling the taxi-man, in the old self-assured tone, " Eighteen A, Carlton House Terrace, please," she was conscious of no excitement. She had just come back to her job. That was all !

As usual, the glass-and-iron door of Carlton House Terrace opened almost before she had rung the gigantic bell. As usual, a blank-faced footman closed it behind her. She gave the foot-man her suit case ; told him—mindful of that accumulated business—that she would have luncheon in the office ; entered the lift, and shot herself upwards.

" Routine," she thought, pausing a second before the red baize door of Lonsdale's room. " And I'll be glad of it to-day."

But to-day—Mary realized the moment she entered the offices—routine had been interrupted. Lonsdale, usually the complete automaton, was not poring over his ledgers. He stood —all a-gape, his spectacles pushed up to his forehead—between his desk and the fire. At his desk—even more immaculate than usual, a gardenia in his buttonhole, patent leathers and white spats on his feet—sat Ivor.

" Heard the news, Miss Millward ? " said Ivor, rising.

" No, Mr. Carslake." Mary, who had never liked the boy, answered a trifle tersely. " What news ? "

" Wedding news," continued Ivor, re-seating himself. " Adrian and Isobel. They're married at last. And about time, too."

The words grated ; but roused curiosity.

" Tell me about it," she said.

" Oh, it's simple enough," explained Ivor. " Mrs. Rose number one—and a nice lot she must have been, by all accounts —departed this life, in a nursing home, as far as I can make out— you know what a reticent devil Adrian is—some time last month. So this morning—bright and early—the happy couple popped into the old Registrar's office. I popped in with 'em. And so did brother-in-law, John. Witnesses, don't you know. The wed-ding's a secret, of course. Old Adrian's keen enough on a bit of

publicity for his plays; but you'll understand he isn't exactly crazy to have the Press say the ceremony took place six years late."

The boy talked on, a trifle coarsely; and listening to his, "They're off to Paris now: brother-in-law John's gone to the station," Mary Millward's moodiness recurred. Ivor's cynicism, Ivor's failure to condole with her on her own loss, hurt. So that she was glad to leave the two men at their gossip; glad of the solitude of her own room, of the many documents revealed as she slid back the revolving shutter of her desk, and, removing the hat from her coiled hair, sat down to work.

"Ivor's like his sister," thought Mary, starting to work; and in that thought—very strangely—lay a new depression.

§ 2

Nor was Mary Millward, on that particular February noon—the noon of the fifteenth, says accuracy—alone in her depression. Mary Millward's employer—standing hat in hand to watch the tail of the Dover boat-train disappear from under the vault of Victoria Station—experienced an almost identical state.

The origin of this state, of course, our friend, John Masterson, did not understand. It had begun—he imagined—at the moment when, some forty-eight hours ago, Adrian had burst into Carlton House Terrace, and very nearly shouted, "Old man, I'm free at last—Isobel and I are being married the day after to-morrow." And ever since then, it had been growing.

He wondered now—as the train vanished—why the happiness of a friend should have set up this particular reaction in him. "I ought to be glad about it," he thought. "And I am—in one way."

But in another way, he couldn't be glad. Because this happiness of Adrian's and Isobel's had almost brought him—as such things will—to doubt his own.

Remembering, very clearly, a look of almost childish beatitude he had caught in Isobel Rose's cornflower-blue eyes as their hands met through the open carriage-window; remembering, with equal clearness, Rose's words, "We've paid our price, John; that's what makes it all so worth while," his thoughts went to his own marriage. What price had he and Irene paid? Was their union "worth while?"

"Of course it is," he told himself.

Yet depression continued to grow, and presently he again remembered that look. This time—strive though loyalty did to

avoid the comparison—he could not help being aware of the difference between Isobel's eyes and the eyes of Irene. Irene's eyes —somehow or other—seemed to have lost their childishness. He could no longer imagine them transfigured—as Isobel's eyes had been transfigured—by sheer unadulterated joy. Wasn't she happy then, this Irene of his? Had he failed her? If so, how?

Perturbing questions! And all the way homewards the perturbation of them increased.

"Something's wrong," said the loyalty in him. "And it's my fault. Mine!"

Luncheon, when he reached Carlton House Terrace, was already on the table. Irene—Euphemia told him—had gone out. Her absence seemed to confirm all that he had been thinking. Yesterday, too, she had been out to lunch. And the day before. Why?

"My fault," re-decided the loyalty in John Masterson. "I've been too much wrapped up in my work. Probably it bores her —lunching with me." And the more our friend considered this decision, the more logical did it seem. So that after lunch—when the servants left them alone—he broached it to his aunt.

"I wonder if you've noticed, Aunt," he began—one always had to finesse with the old lady, "that Irene's —er—changed a bit since the summer. London's a little dull for her, I'm afraid. I'm wondering whether she oughtn't to have a holiday."

"Holiday!" Euphemia's pupils contracted behind their glasses. "But, my dear John, Irene's whole life is a holiday. If you ask *my* opinion, she's getting a little spoiled."

"But I like spoiling her."

Masterson, laughed self-consciously. His aunt, however, did not laugh in reply. Instead she sniffed.

"You're a fool where women are concerned, John," sniffed his aunt. "What Irene wants——"

And Euphemia, once launched on the subject of Irene's wants, would have continued, had she not happened to observe—not for the first time—those little puckers round Masterson's eyes.

"I suppose you know Miss Millward's back," she said, changing the subject and her mind.

§ 3

To Masterson, the news of his secretary's arrival did not seem particularly important. His talk with Euphemia had not lifted his depression. If anything, it had increased it. Even the Martinet, who came fawning in on him, failed to distract his thoughts,

and eventually, ringing for Belton, he asked how soon Irene would be home.

"We are expecting madam at any moment now, sir," announced Belton.

Five minutes later, the Lanchester whirled to the door; and out of it, hurriedly as usual, whirled Irene. "Awfully sorry, darling," said Irene, as they met in the hall; "but I haven't got a tick. I'm due to play tennis at the Botanic in ten minutes. Rupert'll be furious if I'm late. And so will Jill. Oh, and by the way, we've had to borrow Ivor for our fourth. You don't mind, do you? Jill telephoned me just before I went out that her man had let her down. How did the happy couple go off? Rather rot—*I* think—their going off at all. However——"

She broke away after that, and dashed from him—three steps at a time—to change. Watching her go, he felt rather futile. "I suppose I am a fool where women are concerned," he thought. "She seems happy enough to-day."

Nevertheless, once he and the Martinet had made their way upstairs to his sanctum, all his misgivings returned.

He knew that he ought to ring for Mary Millward; to condole with her—personally—on her loss. But somehow, he could not bring himself to do so; and after a few minutes' aimless pacing up and down the shabby carpet, he lit himself a pipe; and, seating himself at his desk, relapsed into a brown study.

In his brown study it seemed to him—almost for the first time in his life—that he was lonely And from that—gradually—he fell to considering the essential differences between himself and his wife. "We *are* different," he told the Martinet, in that quaint wordless language which makes men of his stamp almost at one with their animals. "And it isn't only our ages that make the difference. What is it then, old boy? Tell me—if you can."

But the Martinet's old eyes could give his master no answer; and eventually another question began to nag at his mind. In the old days, before his return to England, he had known how to enjoy himself. There had been a zest about those days—a sense of adventure—of (Adrian's word again!) worth-while-ness. He had felt fitter, then, whereas now—now, all the time—he felt "hipped."

"What's the matter with me?" he asked himself, much as Mary Millward had asked herself that morning; and doing so, looked up to see her at the door.

She apologized, with her usual calm smile, for disturbing him. There were one or two letters—she said—and some cheques

to sign. He thought, as he rose and held out his hand, saying, "How are you, Miss Millward? You know, I'm sure, how sorry we all were to hear . . ." that the black clothes altered her a little, made her—in some strange way—more like the girl he had once known.

And after they had shaken hands, after she had shewn him the letters and taken the chair by his desk, his brain found it a little difficult to concentrate on its jobs.

Meanwhile—in the pauses between his dictation—Mary Millward's mind, too, found concentration a little difficult. Once again, in the actual presence of this man, she began to re-experience that mood of feebleness. Once again, trying to fight off that mood, she formulated her comparison between him and that other who, only twenty-four hours back, had asked her to be his wife.

But that comparison proved strangely perturbing; and, by the time he had finished his letters, she managed to drive it away.

"I don't think there's anything else I need bother you about," she said, closing her notebook. "The cheques can wait till to-morrow if you like."

"Can they?" Masterson spoke slowly, absent-mindedly. "Yes. Probably they can. But there's one thing that can't wait, Miss Millward—and that's this."

He began—while she, anxious yet unwilling to go, watched him from her chair—to fumble among a litter of papers on the desk; and presently, finding the document he needed, handed it over, saying, "You know that awful rookery behind the Blue Boar. Well—it's in the market at last. This is Carfax's advice about it. What's yours?"

Carfax's advice about "Archer's Rents," as the tenement styled itself, was terse and to the point. But Mary Millward—though she knew the advice commerically accurate—could not bring herself to the accountant's side.

This afternoon—as never before—her commercial sense seemed to have deserted her. What did the commercial view of Archer's Rents matter? What did anything matter except that this man, who sat there so patiently while she conned the little bewilderment of figures which Carfax had appended to his report, wanted to pull down that "awful rookery"; wanted—out of the bigness of his heart—to give the worst of Thameside South's slum-dwellers more light, more sunshine, more air?

"Well?" he prompted. "What's your opinion? Shall I make them an offer?"

"I—I don't see why you shouldn't," she began.

A smile—the first she had seen on his face that afternoon—rewarded her; and presently—hardly knowing how it had come about—she found herself listening, all else forgotten, to the full purpose of John Masterson's plan.

"Carfax and Aubreystone don't seem to understand," he told her. "They're good chaps—but they don't go about like I do. After all, when one's got the money, and when one knows the misery there is, one's simply bound to do what one can."

Tea arrived while Masterson was still talking slum-betterment; and after she had poured out for him—a habit this, though neither realized how they had drifted into it—Mary, too, began to talk, helpfully, yet critically, sympathizing here, pointing out a difficulty there. Till gradually—so gradually that neither of them noticed the lifting of it—depression lifted from both of them; and they went back, just for the moment, to the intimacy of that other tea-time—years ago now—in Lipstone. Till presently, from slum-betterment they passed—neither quite understanding how conversation had taken its turn—to Rose's marriage.

"It was a rotten position for Isobel," said Masterson, "and personally I always felt Adrian a little to blame. That's why I'm so glad it's all over." But when she pressed him to tell her why he felt Adrian Rose to blame, talk went from him; and for quite a minute he sat reticent, staring into the fire.

His reticence, however, did not detract from their intimacy. Reticence—she understood—was of this man's very being; as much a part of him as his blue eyes, and those broad shoulders which seemed made for the bearing of other people's responsibilities.

"He *does* bear responsibilities," she thought, as he talked on again, haphazardly. "He's like I am. He believes in duty first."

And that thought, too, proved strangely perturbing; so much so that it came almost as a relief when he let her go.

§ 4

For she was never "modern," this Mary Millward; never over-given—perhaps never sufficiently given—to the study of her own emotions; never in any way akin to that other woman in John Masterson's life who, at this identical moment, sat tense and sex-thrilled in the leather-lined bucket-seat of Rupert Starleigh's "thirty ninety-eight" Vauxhall.

It had been a sudden whim of that other woman's—her

tennis over—to send Jill and Ivor home with Palethorpe while she took this lonely drive with Rupert. And the whim still held I because Rupert hadn't really wanted to take her this drive: because he, her first initiator into sex, was now bent on escape.

"And that's not the least of his attractions," she decided, glancing downwards from under her hatbrim at those fine ungloved hands which played, almost as the hands of a musician, with the black Klaxon button and the twine-bound wheel.

They were travelling fast—fast as Irene's own imaginings. Already—though it was only twenty minutes since they had left the Botanic—Tally Ho Corner lay well behind them, and High Barnet Station only just ahead.

"Want to go on?" he asked her, as they rushed the rise and slowed through the narro tram-blocked town.

"Rather!" answeredwrene. "Rather. Of course I want to go on."

Silent, he swung for the St. Albans road; opened out again; flashed his speedometer needle to fifty-five, to sixty. The wind of their going excited her. Bracing her feet against the slope of the boards, she could feel her knee-joints grinding one another under her skirt. "Fun!" she thought. But it wasn't just fun, this drive. At least, not for Rupert. If it had been, she could have talked.

She wanted to talk. Only something in Rupert's face forbade it. His face—it seemed to her—was grimmer than its wont. The sensuous lips were pressed together. The gray eyes were concentrated on the road.

Leaning forward, he switched on his head-lamps; and by the faint beams of them she saw faces flitter by; cycles; the back of another car; the back of a farm wagon which his near wing missed by an inch.

"Going a bit fast, aren't you?" she ventured.

He answered her angrily, yet with a gleam of that sardonic humour which was another of his attractions, "Of course I'm going fast. What do you think you're in—a common or garden flivver?" and after that, muttering something which sounded like, "It's my car, ain't it, not yours," trod on his accelerator till the veering needle touched sixty-five, seventy—held seventy for a whole straight mile.

Instinct rather than reason warned her of his immediate purpose. Angry with himself for the weakness which had made him pander to her fancy, he was now trying to frighten her; trying to make her ask him to stop. But the speed only added to her excitement; gave her no sense of fear.

The sway of the car, the drumming of its engine, the thrum of its tyres, intoxicated her. The telegraph-posts, as they stormed past, looked like giant hop-poles. She wanted to tell him about the hop-poles; wanted to laugh at him for thinking he could make her afraid; did laugh, in a funny high-pitched tremolo, when the first traffic of St. Albans set his four-wheel brakes grinding. But Rupert, blaring on his Klaxon, only repeated his question, "Want to go on?"

She, too, repeated herself, "Rather! Rather. Of course I want to go on"; and they went on, recklessly, through the town, out of the town and up that long road which leads, switch-backing, for Coventry.

Twilight was over now; and the beams of their rushing headlamps shone brighter—bright as two silver swords that cut their way through the slathers of the dark. Those beams—it seemed to her—isolated them from all their kind. Behind them, they were alone in a headlong world: in a world where two bodies, yearning to be one body, might touch—must touch every time the wheel swung over and some great curve of hedgerow sped skidding by. Yet Rupert's body—she knew—was afraid of her body: more afraid of it than he could ever make her by his headlong speed.

A league he sped, and another league—through a village—out of a village—up hill and away. She was laughing again now; and suddenly her laughter found words—words that flashed scorn at him as they flew.

"You fool, Rupert," she flashed at him. "You damn fool—thinking you can put the wind up *me*."

At that, he muttered again, "It's my car, ain't it? I'll drive it how I please." But she knew that the words had stung him; and presently, he slowed from seventy-five to sixty, from sixty to a steady forty-two. Then, abruptly, his right foot pressed for his brake-pedal, and, before she quite realized what had happened, the low car was at a standstill under trees.

"You've the devil's own nerve nowadays," he said, turning to her in the gloom.

"Didn't I always have, Rupert?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know as well as I do."

"Possibly. But I don't care to recollect."

His sulkiness fired her. She was conscious that her knee-muscles had relaxed their grinding; that her feet were no longer braced against the boards. She was conscious that if he touched her, if she felt his hands on her, or his lips, she might yield herself

to him. Conscious that he, too, was conscious of these things, and in his consciousness of them more than ever afraid.

She imagined herself conquering his fear; mastering him: savoured that mastery, almost as a fruit, between her moist lips.

"I'm sorry you don't care to recollect," said those moist lips.

"Why?"

His monosyllable was harsh—more like an indrawn breath than a word; and she did not answer it with any word—only with low laughter.

"Why?" he repeated.

But Irene only laughed again.

Her laughter maddened Starleigh. He wanted to catch her to him, to crush her to him, to crush her lips to him under the vengeance of a kiss. Only thus could he revenge himself on her—revenge himself for his fear of being disloyal to his friend. Yet the last strands of his fear still held him taut from her; held his hands to the twine-bound wheel.

Presently, her laughter stilled. Presently, as they sat silent, their eyes fending for one another in the gloom, a three-ton lorry came rumbling by. The lights of that lorry shewed her every twitch of his pale lashes; every thought-flicker in his gray pupils; every tension of every finger that had sought safety on the wheel.

"He played with *me* once," she said to herself; and aloud, "Isn't it about time we were turning back, Rupert? I'm afraid John'll be nervous if I'm not home by eight."

And all the way home she knew—not unthrilled in her knowledge—that he was cursing himself for a fool.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

§1

"THEN you feel it, too?" said Adrian Rose.

"Something of it, I admit."

The playwright and his wife, back from their "honeymoon" a full fortnight, were sitting—at half-past ten of a marvellous March morning—on the cushioned seat of their big window overlooking the Embankment. Happy, both of them, in their new security, they had been discussing—as is the habit of such—the happiness of others; and out of that had drifted, quite casually, into a discussion about John.

"What *is* worrying old John?" went on Rose. "It can't be money. And it can't be a woman. Any fool could see that he's still head over heels in love with Irene. Then *what* is it? It can't be just the death of that old dog."

"It might be," decided Isobel. "He was awfully fond of the Martinet."

"Well—let's hope you're right."

"I'm almost sure I'm right, darling."

Isobel, who had spoken a trifle disingenuously, dismissed the topic with a wave of her delicate hands; and after a little while, reminding her husband, "Don't forget we're lunching at Carlton House Terrace to-day. I'll meet you there if you don't come back after your walk," kissed him; got up from the window-seat, and went about her household business.

Adrian, however—still seated—continued to think about his friend. The death of the Martinet—whatever Isobel might say about it—could not possibly account for the alteration he had perceived, immediately on his return from Paris, in his friend John. And besides, the alteration hadn't only been in John. Recently, the very atmosphere of John's house seemed to have changed.

"Something's wrong," said Rose's imagination. "But what? What?"

He tried—not out of curiosity but in mere friendship—to

find some tangible answer to this question. But the thing eluded him; and presently, rising and going to his big work-table, he lit himself the first cigar of the day. After which—the day being Saturday and his secretary down with influenza—he went out for his walk.

Walking, however, re-stimulated his imagination; and shortly before midday, his feet turned him in the direction of Carlton House Terrace.

John's house, once entered, re-confirmed his suspicions. Despite the efficient footman who let him into the shining hall, despite the page-like boy who escorted him into the lift, despite each and every perfection of detail his quick eyes noticed during his ascent, that queer sense which distinguished this man from most of his fellows kept warning him that trouble impended over this place. And by the time the lift reached the fourth floor, this warning had become so strong that the sight of Ivor Carslake, who rose from his desk in the outer office saying, "Hullo, Adrian! John's doing his letters. He won't be more than ten minutes. Sit down, won't you; and have a fag," proved a positive relief.

For there was nothing unusual about Ivor Carslake. If his face were a little pasty, his trousers just a little out of crease, his brown eyes a trifle bloodshot, and his words just a trifle inconsequent—these blemishes, it seemed to Rose, who had a particular contempt for the post-war type of youth, could all be attributed to the usual cause.

"You look as though you wanted a holiday," he commented. "Hope I'm not putting too much work on you with those Fellowship accounts of mine. If I am, we could easily get a firm of accountants——"

"Don't you worry your head about that, Adrian." Ivor spoke quickly. "Your bally old accounts don't take me a quarter of an hour a day. And I don't want a holiday either. What made you say I did?"

"Well—you're not looking over-fit."

"Oh, that's nothing. Morning after the night before, don't you know. Besides, I've been having a pretty thin time lately. Jolly hard up, as a matter of fact. Between you and me and the gatepost, there's a girl. Corking nice girl, too. One of the very best. And it's quite all right. I mean, we're going to get married one of these days. You may know her perhaps. Milly Reeves. She was in one of your shows once. On tour. Now she's gone in for revue."

"Really." Rose—as always when outsiders talked theatre to him—had lost interest.

"Yes," rattled on Ivor. "She's doing awfully well, too. Getting her six quid a week. Devilish expensive for me, though—I don't mind telling you. You know what it is, old man. Suppers—and all that sort of thing. When a girl's in revue she expects 'em. One can't very well say, No. And if one says, Yes, well—it costs the bally earth."

"Quite," said the uninterested Rose. "Quite." And so saying wondered—automatically, as is the characteristic of his race—whether by any chance this talk might be leading up to the subject of a loan.

Ivor, however, seemed to be demanding nothing but sympathy; and from the moment Mary Millward entered the room, Rose dismissed him altogether from his mind. For in Mary Millward's whole demeanour—doubt it though his commonsense might—was drama.

What this woman's drama might be, Adrian Rose did not pretend to know. But he did know—being that outsider who sees most of the game—that here stood a creature in profound distress.

The hand she gave him (it would have helped him to realize her state had he known how, all through the long morning at her employer's side, Mary Millward had been conscious of the strangest drum-beats pulsing and pulsing in all her veins) felt a little moist, a little tremulous. Her voice had lost its forthrightness. Her face might have been of wax—the colour no longer integral to it, but super-imposed, as it were, on pallor.

In one way, that face was the face of youth; in another, older than all the ages. The cheeks of it still kept their contours; but the contours were shrunken. The eyes blazed—like blue lamps through which a soul was peering. And all about this woman there radiated—or so at least it appeared to Rose's hypersensitive imagination—an aura of unease.

"Mr. Masterson can see you now, Major Rose," she said in that new, queer, nervous voice of hers.

He followed her—chiding himself for a super-imaginative fool—through her own office (her office—he observed—in contradiction to Ivor's, was scrupulously tidy, almost conventual in its shining neatness) and so into John's sanctum.

"You won't forget this afternoon, will you, Miss Millward?" said John, as she withdrew.

It struck Rose—at the time—for curious that John should address her before greeting him. But after she had left them alone, his interest in her abated; and his mind regained its normal poise. John—thank goodness—seemed almost his old self.

"Good of you to drop in, old man," he said. "Where's Isobel? Downstairs?"

"No. She's coming on later. In time for lunch."

"How is she?"

"Flourishing."

"That's splendid. Care for a drink?"

It was not Rose's habit to take whiskies-and-sodas before lunch. But to-day he felt glad of the stimulant. It gave him courage; and he felt that he needed courage to put the question:

"John, what's worrying you these days? You look different, somehow. At least you did when I saw you last. Isobel's noticed it, too. Is it anything to do with your building schemes? Is there any way *I* can help?"

"I'm a bit under the weather, I think, Adrian." To the other's surprise, Masterson spoke with less than his usual reticence. "Out of sorts. Nothing serious, though."

"Over-work?" suggested Rose.

"No. I don't think it's that."

"Lack of exercise?"

"Possibly."

"What about seeing a doctor?"

"My dear chap, I've never had a day's illness in my life."

And John Masterson laughed; was still laughing when, half an hour later, he and a very puzzled Adrian made their way downstairs.

§ 2

In the drawing-room—though Irene had not yet condescended to shew herself—several of her lunch-guests were already waiting.

The Ayrton girls, Doris and Phyllis, a pair of slightly over-dressed, slightly over-powdered, and very vivacious young wenches (nowadays his wife's constant companions), greeted Masterson with outstretched arms. By the far fireplace, Cynthia Trevor's Tom, back again from one of his usual sea-jaunts, stood stammering commonplaces to Euphemia. Over the big piano—deep in gossip—leaned Cynthia and Jill Fernshaw. A nondescript young man, glossy of hair and sloping of forehead, whose name Adrian never could remember, meditated near the cocktail-tray. Silhouetted against one of the tall windows, Rupert Starleigh was lighting one of his inevitable cigarettes.

"How de do, John?" said Rupert Starleigh, lounging across the parquet. "How de do, Adrian?"

He shook hands with them both; and began to talk shop.

"Don't like the look of things," he confided. "Industry's in a bad way."

It seemed to Rose that he was a little on edge. But then Rupert always had been rather an edgy fellow. And besides, the present state of the markets was enough to give any broker nerves. "All nerves myself," decided Rose. "Painting devils on the wall." And nearly all the devils which Adrian Rose had been painting on the wall of his imagination vanished at Irene's appearance.

She appeared—straight off her horse, wearing a short aproned habit which shewed off her young figure to perfection—in a whirlwind of laughter and apologies. Her eyes were starry with health, her cheeks glowing, her spirits infectious. In contrast to her, his own Isobel—who came in a moment or two later—seemed quiet as a mouse.

"Heard the news?" bubbled Irene. "Nell Arthursons's engaged. She told me so just now. In the Park. That makes her fourth. Who says we're behind America in divorce?"

The news—principally because only three people in the room knew Nell Arthurson's history—fell rather flat. But Irene insisted on drinking to the engagement; and as the glossy-haired youth filled her cocktail glass, Rose—his sense of humour uppermost—guessed that youth's secret. "He's in love with her," guessed Rose. "And a lot of good it'll do him. She's got as much use for him as she has for me."

Meanwhile, however, Isobel Rose was watching Starleigh. Isobel had never liked Starleigh; and to-day—her intuition active—she liked him less than ever. Couldn't Adrian—usually so wide-awake in such matters—see that Starleigh's interest in John's wife transcended the platonic? Didn't he perceive how John's wife—all the time she toyed with her cocktail-glass—kept glancing in Starleigh's direction? Oughtn't she to tell Adrian that thing which—ever since their return—all her womanliness had been suspecting?

"But I can't tell him," decided Rose's Isobel. "Because it *is* only a suspicion. Because I'm nothing like sure."

Nevertheless, all through lunch—they sat down twenty, to the sort of meal one gets in a restaurant rather than in a home—Isobel Rose's suspicions continued to grow. She even wondered fleetingly whether John, very silent on her left, mightn't also have his suspicions. Which only shews that womanly intuition—uncanny though it can be—is a poor guide.

For if, at that particular moment, some kindly fairy could have given Isobel Rose a direct insight into the processes of her

host's brain, she would have seen only an incident, ten days old now, with which Rupert Starleigh—at least insofar as Masterson himself knew—had no connection at all.

That incident (or, rather, series of incidents) had been puzzling our friend ever since its (or, rather, their) occurrence. It seemed so ridiculous that the death of a sixteen-year-old dog (however much one might personally grieve for the loss of his companionship) should set up such a gamut of emotions that even after ten days one's mind was still vibrating like a fiddle-string to the mere recollection of the whole affair. And yet—ridiculous or not—the affair still puzzled him; and presently, seated there, talking as little as he need, at the head of his long talkative table, John Masterson's mind re-constructed it again.

There had been nothing particularly mysterious, nothing particularly tragic, about the Martinet's death. That he had died in this very room, and under that picture of the man who had bred him, seemed explainable enough. That Belton had left the door open; and Menelik, usually the last of the household to retire, had happened to look in and find him stiff against the skirting, were natural happenings. He was always prowling about the house, was the Martinet. And heart-failure killed old dogs just as it killed old men.

But why Menelik, instead of coming straight to his master in the next-door library, should have gone upstairs to Mary Millward's sitting-room, was a subtlety of the Oriental mind which defeated Masterson completely. As completely as it still defeated him to understand what could have been in Mary Millward's mind when, entering the library, she had said, "I've got bad news, Mr. Masterson. The Martinet's dead. I—I could have borne it if he hadn't died all alone."

That was the moment when he had realized her—his imagination suddenly active—on the verge of tears; when—with equal suddenness—he had remembered his early dream. And after that, she *had* cried, to herself, quietly: while he, feeling unutterably foolish, did his best to console her by saying, "It doesn't matter, Miss Millward. Really it doesn't matter. It's very rarely bull-terriers live beyond sixteen."

His words—he recollected quite clearly—had made her smile through her tears. "That's so like you," she had smiled. "Isn't it?" And that saying, too, defeated his mind.

But what defeated him most—at least about this part of the affair—were his own feelings when they stood, side-by-side, Menelik watching them, over the dead body of the dog. Only "nerves"—he imagined—could have accounted for the way her

voice shook as she said, " Faithful unto death. I believe I'm glad he died where he did, under your father's picture." And her " nerves "—surely—must have communicated their stress to his own. Because otherwise, why should he have reproached himself—almost as though it were a crime—with having treated her, for the best part of a year, as a mere piece of his domestic machine ? " She's a woman," he remembered thinking. " She's flesh and blood."

And that reproach, that thought had not left his mind when—just as Mary Millward turned to leave him—Irene had come in on them. Irene's face—impossible as it seemed now, watching her dimple with delight across the multitude of rose bowls—had been one mask of rage. She had taken no notice of Mary Millward, none of Menelik.

" Why wasn't *I* told ? " she had asked him. " He's my dog as much as yours."

" The master's wife in own room," Menelik had tried to explain. " Me no come to master's wife's room." And on that, her anger had burst like a thunder-clap.

He remembered her shouting at him, shouting that the other two should go ; remembered Mary's going, the door closing behind her ; remembered the things Irene had said to him once they were alone : " How dare they ? How dare they ? They're conspiring against me. Both of them. I hate her. I hate her. I hate her."

And then, with no warning, had come tears—not quiet as Mary Millward's had been, but an avalanche of sobbing that seemed to tear the very throat out of Irene, that shook her where she stood. And then, following the tears, passion : her arms round his neck, her body writhing against him, her lips raining kisses—hot kisses on his mouth.

" Love me," she had stammered between those hot kisses. " Love me. Never mind what I said just now. Don't try to understand me. Just love me."

And that night all the inhibitions, all the restraints he had been practising towards her, had been burned up : leaving him (and hence most of the worry Adrian Rose could not fathom) love-satiate and incredulous ; stunned to an old knowledge, an old recoil, by the violence of his own desires.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

§ 1

WITH a start, John Masterson came back from his ten-day-old recollections to the actual present.

Irene's lunch-party neared its end; coffee was on the table; Belton had just handed him a cigar. Absent-mindedly he clipped the cigar, lit it; drank his coffee, and tried to throw himself into the general conversation. But the general conversation failed to hold him. For that old recoil was still working on his mind; and every time his eyes met his wife's across the rose bowls, memory irked him to distress.

"Passion," said his distress. "Passion. Not quite right. Somehow, not quite right."

Why passion—between a man and a woman only ten months married—should not be quite right, John Masterson had no idea. Any more than he had any idea—all sex-thoughts being naturally abhorrent to him—that what his subconscious, as apart from his conscious mind, was trying to say was, "There's another kind of love—can't you remember it?—ever so long ago—at Masters-leigh—when you were little more than a boy." Nevertheless, memories continued to irk him, and he was glad when, half-way through his cigar, the women withdrew.

Alone with the men, he felt a little happier: happier still when the vapid youth on his right removed himself to join another of the same ilk, and he was joined by his three best friends, Adrian, Tom Trevor and Rupert Starleigh. Adrian and Tom seemed a trifle more taciturn than usual; Rupert decidedly voluble.

"How's The Animal shaping for Aintree?" began Rupert. "I got twenties about him yesterday. Oh—and talking of Aintree, I've been thinking—as a matter of fact I spoke to Irene about it only just now—that it wouldn't be half a bad egg if I were to write my governor and see if he could put the three of us up at Grinstead. Then we might have a chance of seeing the old race in comfort."

"Rather a sound scheme, that," said Masterson. "What's Irene got to say about it?"

"Oh, she's dead game. The question is, are you?"

"Of course. If it won't be putting your governor to any inconvenience."

"Then we'll call it a deal"—and Rupert, his point made, switched the conversation: while Adrian Rose, who had been watching Masterson throughout their meal, continued to revolve many problems in his mind.

"Can't make head or tail of things," confided Adrian to his Isobel when, some quarter of an hour later, their Rolls rolled them away. "But if ever I saw a woman on edge, it's that secretary-woman of John's."

"And what can she have to do with it?" thought Isobel. But aloud she said nothing—because the thing she suspected seemed too dangerous to say.

§ 2

Meanwhile, John Masterson had bidden good-bye to most of his guests; of whom only the two vapid youths, Rupert and the Ayrton girls were now left in the drawing-room.

"Do you think I could slip away before long?" he whispered to Irene.

"If you want to," she whispered back. "But where are you going?"

"Archer's Rents."

"Alone?"

"No. I'm taking Miss Millward."

"All right, dear. Do just as you like."

Irene, though she gave him one curious look from under her flickering lashes, said no more; and after he had excused himself to the Ayrtons on the grounds, "I usually look round my tenements on a Saturday—it's about the only time one has a chance of getting in touch," he made his way back to the offices.

In his sanctum, the letters he had dictated that morning were ready for signature. Signing them, he asked Mary Millward, "I hope you don't mind coming down with me?" and when she answered, "I'm only too glad to, Mr. Masterson," felt a certain pleasure in the reply.

These days, there seemed something extraordinarily companionable about Mary Millward. And besides, ever since the night of the Martinet's death, he had been sorry for her. She stirred his sense of chivalry, now: but no other sense . . . because all his other senses were still concentrated on Irene.

Irene and Rupert were in the hall when the pair of them came downstairs. Irene asked him, casually, if he would be home for tea ; and when he said he doubted it, went on, " All right. Then Rupert shall stay and keep me amused." Also, she kissed him, equally casually, on the cheek. " I'm going to have a bath," he heard her tell Rupert while a footman was calling him a taxi (he had developed, latterly, a certain shyness of taking any of the cars on his slumming expeditions) ; " shan't be long—you can wait for me upstairs."

It rather pleased him that Irene should be going to spend the afternoon with Rupert ; and, following Mary Millward into the taxi, he again felt happy in his friends. "Tom—Rupert—Adrian," he thought. " Staunch fellows. I've a lot to be thankful for."

Then—as often nowadays—he began to think about Mary Millward. It was queer—he thought—that Mary Millward had never married. And presently, he found himself looking at her with a new interest. She had charm, he discovered suddenly : a peculiar quiet charm, not in the least comparable with Irene's. A charm as of the English countryside—peaceful. And after that, he began talking with her—as he had never talked before —of England.

" Politics can't help England," he began as they rattled through the trafficless City. " The root of our trouble is economic. Costs—wages—production. Even the sort of thing I'm trying to do isn't much use."

His talk—innocent though it was—set those strange drum-beats re-pulsing in all Mary Millward's veins. But the drum-beats, even this afternoon, told her nothing of the truth.

To her, this man was still only the employer. That she under-stood him ; that she had his confidence, insofar as he ever gave anyone his confidence ; and that she was helping him, insofar as anyone could help him, in the task he had set himself ; and that, ever since the sight of the Martinet lying under his father's picture had drawn from her that heart-felt, " Faithful unto death," she had been conscious of her heart's opening, as a flower in the sunlight, whenever she let thought dwell upon him—these things Mary Millward knew. But that she loved this man —this last enlightenment was still hidden from her by that wall of self-misunderstanding which, for the unintrospective Mary Millwards of this world, only some stout blow of circumstance can bring crashing to the ground.

So they came to Archer's Rents ; so, for a full two hours, note-book in hand (and her hand trembled a little at the miseries

which Archer's Rents revealed to them); Mary Millward followed her employer from room to dreadful room of that appalling tenement; so she watched him talk with slatternly women and disgruntled men; so the pair of them—she doubtful of every step, he with the quick confident tread of men who have walked the jungle after their game—went down and up, up and down those rotten staircases, peering here, peeping there, planning always, yet every plan ending in destruction.

For Archer's Rents had to come down; be re-built from roof to foundation. That was the only plan they could make for it. He told her so, long before they had finished their inspection; and she agreed.

"Am I to remit the arrears?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered. "Every farthing of them."

Soul-sick, and almost body-sick, they emerged from Archer's Rents into reeking refuse-littered alleys. While they worked, a strange blight had curtained all the sky. Rain, threatening ever since they left Carlton House Terrace, had started. Mist and gloom choked the alley-ways; and out of the mist and the gloom they heard a man's curse, the shriek of a child. Masterson left her for a moment. She heard his voice, a parade rasp in it, say, "You live in the Rents, don't you? I thought so. And your name's Hicks. If I catch you touching a child again, Hicks—you'll be turned out of your room. And your wife with you. Is that clear?"

She heard the man mumble an apology. But when Masterson returned, his face shewed stern in the gloom. "I'll find you a taxi," he said.

"But aren't you coming home?"

"No." His voice was decisive—and she had no need to question him as to his intention. He would go back to the Rents, make sure of the child's safety.

"Please don't bother about me, Mr. Masterson," she answered. "There's a Tube Station just round the corner."

He lifted his hat, and left her, almost at a run.

§ 3

Making her deliberate way out of the alleys into one of those tram-lined East London main streets which, to her eyes, always seemed more awful than the slums their shop-frontages concealed, Mary Millward tried to picture the present scene in Archer's Rents—the child, its parents, her employer. But the picture refused to materialize; and once again, when—her ticket taken—

she stood in gloom and solitude on the long, cold, empty platform of the underground station, her mood was all of feebleness, of unrestraint.

The open air into which she emerged from Charing Cross Station was the same she had left in the Mile End Road. Over the West, as over the East, brooded a blight. Already, the Embankment trolleys had lit their electrics. Motor-lamps and street-lamps shone at her as she stepped out, a little more slowly than her wont, up Northumberland Avenue.

"It's this weather that's depressing me," she thought.

The thought comforted her; but passing under Admiralty Arch, she had the impulse to turn back, to take a rare evening's enjoyment; and once beyond the archway, she halted —hesitant, unknowing what to do.

High to her left, Big Ben's yellow face told her it was barely five o'clock. "Too early to go out yet," she decided. "And besides, if I'm going, I ought to change."

The usual footman met her as she entered with her latch-key. The usual lights were on in the hall. But beyond the hall, the vast staircase rose into unusual gloom. Looking up she had the impression that the outdoor blight must have been wafted within.

"Would you like the lift, miss?" asked the footman, and she answered the man, not knowing why, "No, thank you, Perkins. I'll walk."

On the first floor—its Cupid torch refracting dull silver on the carved lotus of the newel-post—one bracket-light shewed her the closed door of Irene's boudoir. On the second, was darkness; on the third, which she shared with Euphemia, she encountered Pettery.

"Miss Euphemia's not very well this afternoon, miss," said Pettery. "Indeed, I've never known her worse. She's in a regular state. I wonder if you'd mind having a look at her."

Euphemia's "states"—during the last few weeks—had been of fairly frequent occurrence; and Mary Millward, taking off her hat and coat in her own room, felt a little resentful of Pettery's importunity. "I'm not a hospital nurse," thought Mary Millward, tidying the gold coils of her hair.

But the first sight of the old lady, whom she found upright in her bed, a crumpled newspaper at one shawled elbow, and a half-empty cup of tea at the other, turned all Mary's resentment to pity. This woman, too—for all the brusquerie of her, "So it's you, is it? And where have you been all the afternoon?"—was lonely. Lonely, and frail, and obviously in some distress.

"I've been with your nephew," she answered, taking a seat by the bed.

"And where is my nephew?"

"I left him in the East End."

"Will he be back soon?"

"I expect so. Is there anything *I* can do for you, Miss Masterson?"

"No. At least I don't think so. You can stop here for ten minutes if you like. And perhaps you'd read me this article. My eyes aren't what they were. And Pettery *will* drop her aitches."

Mary Millward—a trifle amused at the old lady's idea of condescension—took Euphemia's newspaper, and began to read.

Half-way through the article, however, Euphemia interrupted.

"How much did February's household books come to?" interrupted Euphemia.

"Between eight and nine hundred pounds."

"Twice as much as they ought to be. What did my nephew say when he paid them?"

"I can't remember his saying anything, Miss Masterson."

"Then he ought to have said something. It's"—Euphemia's thin shoulders shook under the shawl—"it's disgraceful the way things are going on this house. And no comfort. I was a thousand times more comfortable with Parker and Ellison. But then, nobody bothers about *me*. I'm an—an anachronism. I ought to be in my grave. Oh yes, I ought. Don't *you* contradict. *My* views are out of date. When *I* was a girl, husbands and wives spent their Saturday afternoons together. Not——"

Euphemia who, at least towards people she regarded as her "inferiors," possessed, even when in one of her "states," a good deal of the family self-control, did not press the subject which had thrown her into this one; but for quite ten minutes Mary Millward, motionless by the bedside, had to listen to a flood of generalities about "these modern wives." These modern wives—sniffed Euphemia—might suit modern husbands. But they wouldn't have suited "her dear brother." Her dear brother would have called them "fast." And they were "fast." Trollops, some of them. Yes—regular dollymops. Absolute trulls. Those two Ayrton girls now—did Miss Millward know them?—what sort of wives would *they* make? Etcætera. Etcætera.

Listening to those generalities, far too clever not to see the indirect application of them, Mary Millward found herself also listening to a voice in her own heart.

" You're as old-fashioned as this poor old lady," said the voice in her own heart. " If you were married to a man, you'd want to spend his Saturday afternoons with him ; you wouldn't want——"

But from that last saying of her own heart—from the comparison it conjured up, and the recollection of the words she had heard Irene say while the footman was fetching that afternoon's taxi—all the decencies in Mary Millward shied away.

Still safe behind her wall of misunderstanding, she ordered herself not to think of such things ; not to dwell—even for a moment—on any of those dim, disturbing suspicions which, ever since the scene over the Martinet's dead body, had been eating their way maggot-like into all the recesses of her brain.

And that wall—last barrier between this woman and her soul's enlightenment—was still standing when Euphemia dammed the stream of her generalities, saying, " Thank you for sitting with me. I'm better. I think I'll read a little. Would you mind going downstairs to the drawing-room and fetching me my book ? "

§ 3

Mary Millward—it has already been said—possessed the premonitious mind ; and as she started to get Euphemia's book that mind said to her, quite clearly, " Don't go yourself. Send Pettery."

Pettery, however, was not to be seen ; and, chiding herself for her folly, she made her way along the bright landing to the head of the stairs.

Below her, the second floor still shewed as a corridor of gloom ; and in that gloom, her premonitions sensed mystery. Till, half-way down the flight, a sound first frightened, then made her smile at her own fear. Irene must be in her bathroom. She could hear the rush of water, the faint humming of a gay song.

The rush of water ceased when Mary Millward reached the second floor. But the gay song continued. The door of Irene's bathroom was just ajar. Through it, came a thin slant of light. The light comforted Mary ; the song attracted her. She listened to it as she went by ; wondered what it could be. " Tralala," went the song. " Tralala—nobody knows—nobody cares."

Relieved—though why, she did not know—Mary continued on her way downstairs. On the first floor, the one Cupid's torch still glowed near the newel-post. The cedar door of the boudoir was still closed. She made for the drawing-room ; clicked on a light or two ; began her search for Euphemia's book.

The book, however, wasn't there. She could neither find it where Euphemia had indicated—under her special chair ; nor on the shelves by the fireplace, nor on any of the tables. Probably, Pettery had already retrieved the novel. Still, one had better search.

Mary Millward, clicking on more light, did search—thoroughly—here, there, everywhere about the enormous room. But the novel had disappeared ; and, after a few more minutes, she gave up the search, replunged the room into darkness, and went out, closing the double doors quietly behind her.

The big landing seemed gloomier than ever. Even the Cupid's torch—it appeared—had dimmed something of its light. And passing the boudoir, sound frightened her again.

This time, she did not smile at her own fear : but stood tense, listening. In the boudoir, someone was playing the piano—playing the same gay tune she had heard through Irene's bathroom door. And that someone—said every instinct in her—must be Lord Rupert Starleigh.

Instantly, her mind flashed back to Euphemia. What did the old lady know ? What did she suspect ? What was there to suspect ? " Nothing," answered the decencies in Mary Millward. " Nothing." But even as that answer made itself, another sound reached her ears.

Irene had issued from her bathroom ; had closed the door of it ; was approaching the stairs. " Tralala," hummed Irene very softly, " tralala." And on that—miserably—Mary Millward panicked. " Don't let her see you," shouted her every instinct, " don't let her see that she's been seen."

But instinct shouted too late.

Already, Irene had reached the top of the flight. Already she was half-way down. Slowly she moved, and rhythmically, almost as though hypnotized by the piano-music and the hum of the song. One of her little hands just touched the stair-rail. From the other, held in a long holder, dangled a lighted cigarette.

Now—still in shadow—she paused for a second ; lifted the holder to her lips. The glow of the puffed cigarette shewed her lips scarlet ; and on her cheeks, too, Mary saw scarlet—two little patches of scarlet newly made by the rouge. And now she moved on again, more slowly still, into the silver radiance of the light.

Her eyes were half-closed, downcast. The long holder dangled once more. She had ceased to hum. A tea-gown of filmy purple half-draped her ; and half-revealed. And now, as the tea-gown brushed the last of the balusters and the ghost of

a smile crinkled the corners of those scarlet lips, Mary Millward knew all that thing of her which it was not good that she should know.

The evil knowledge transfixed Mary Millward—petrified her where she stood. Speechless, motionless, scarcely conscious of that tune which still sounded its mockery through the door behind, she could only stare. And even while she stared, Irene's eyes met hers.

No fear gleamed in those eyes—only hatred. Cat's eyes they seemed—luminous with malice. And Irene's feet, too, seemed cat-like. They did not falter on the last of the staircase; but moved her on, in a dead silence, till her free hand grasped the lotus of the newel-post, and they were so close to one another that Mary could smell the perfume of her cigarette.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked the woman with the cigarette; and her voice was all one insolence, like a whip-flick across the other's face.

"I came to find a book for your aunt."

"Really."

The cigarette-holder re-lifted itself to Irene's lips; and in that movement, too, even more than in her word, was insolence, and something more than insolence, disbelief: so that for a full thirty seconds—while they faced one another, almost breast to breast, and always to the tinkle of the piano through the door—Mary Millward could have answered her with an open blow.

But Mary Millward's right hand, though it itched to strike, would not raise itself from her side; and at last, still transfixed by that evil knowledge, she said, "I'm sorry if you don't believe me"; and made to pass.

Irene's hand, however, still gripped the newel-post of the stairs. Her breasts—Mary Millward saw—were heaving under their purple silk. And her eyes were still cat-like—cruel beyond belief.

"Not yet," said Irene, "Not till you've explained what you're doing here."

"I have explained," retorted Mary Millward; and now, in her voice also was an insolence, the insolence of scorn.

"With a lie."

"Mrs. Masterson——"

"With a lie, I tell you." Irene's foot tapped once at the marble of the landing. "Deny it, if you dare. You say you came to fetch my aunt's book. Where *is* the book? You haven't got it. Of course you haven't got it. Because you *didn't* come to fetch any book. Because you came here spying——"

"Spying!"

"Yes. Spying on me."

Now, for an interminable second, rage silenced them both. And now, for yet another second, the music from beyond the door seemed, to both of them, as a challenge out of negroid darkness, urging negroid violence, urging them to maim one another, to destroy. "Tralala," went the music, "tralala—nobody cares for you—kill one another—kill!"

Then, with a ghastly abruptness, the music ceased; and to its ceasing both of them found final tongue.

"So you *don't* believe me," repeated Mary; and Irene, "I never believe *servants*, Miss Millward. Servants always lie—even when one catches them at key-holes, spying on one through one's own door."

And with that, before the other's lips could frame any answer, Irene was gone.

§ 4

Irene had been gone five seconds, ten seconds, a whole minute. But Mary Millward still stood, almost as a woman stricken with palsy, by the boudoir-door. Her wrists, her ankle-bones, her whole body shook. Something was hurting her body—torturing it to agony. And in her bodily agony she wanted to scream out on whatever gods there were that they should strike her dead. But she could not scream because, in her brain, too, was an agony—an agony as of crashing walls, of walls crashing headlong, letting in the light.

The light through the crashing walls blinded her. Her very soul was in travail. She could feel it tearing at her as she gripped for the silver lotus, as she wrenched her feet from the marble, as she began to make her way upstairs to her own rooms.

She had to get to her own rooms; had to find out the source of this intolerable agony, of this intolerable light. For the agony and the light kept growing on her—growing and growing as she wrenched her feet up the stairs.

At last she reached the door of her own sitting-room; opened it; let herself, locked herself in. Her curtains had been drawn. Tea was laid on the table. A fire glowed in the grate. By the fire, close to it, stood her one comfortable chair. She dropped into the chair, buried her head in her hands. The fire flickered at her—flickered pink through the shield of her hands. "Don't," she muttered at the fire. "Don't. I can't bear light. I want darkness. Darkness." Yet all the while light—not of the fire—kept growing on her mind.

And the light—she knew now—was a love-light, a love-light too painful to be borne. "John," flashed the love-light. "John! What would *he* say, if he knew."

It did not surprise her to find herself thinking of him as "John"; hardly surprised her to discover that she, who knew his wife's shame, loved this John; loved him beyond all belief. What did surprise her was her rage against John's wife; against this . . . this creature who, unworthy to latch his shoe-strings, betrayed him in his own house, and with his own friend.

"The trollop!" said her rage, repeating Euphemia. "The dollymop. The insolent little trull."

Presently, however, her rage cooled; and presently, taking her hands from before her eyes, she sat upright.

"This is crisis," she thought. "What am I to do? What *can* I do —except wait."

For obviously, the key of this position was not in her hands, but in the hands of John's wife. Supposing John's wife gave him some version—garbled, of course—of their quarrel. Supposing John's wife insisted she must go. What then?

"Should I tell him?" she asked herself. "Should I tell him *why* we quarrelled—the whole truth?"

The crudeness of the mental question shocked all the decencies in her; brought home—as nothing else could have brought home—the actuality of her own case. Did she love so blindly, so passionately? Or was her love of a finer tissue, spiritual and not bodily, seeking only the loved one's good? If so, what must she do for John's good? John loved this worthless woman.

Yet John needed *her*—in his work, in his household. John need never know of her love for him.

And besides—besides—how could she now bring herself to go away from John?

On that—agonized again—Mary Millward rose from her chair and began to pace, very slowly, up and down, down and up her little old-fashioned room. *If* John's wife took action, she, his secretary, would have to leave him. But was it likely that John's wife would take any action? Guilty—and of course she was guilty, because no woman rejoining any but a lover could have smiled that ghost of a smile—wouldn't this woman's very guilt enjoin her to silence? And if this were so, must not she, too, keep silence; keep herself, at all cost and at any, from the slightest step which might bring suspicion (and with suspicion, misery, because he loved this worthless woman) upon John?

And, "Of course I must keep silence," decided Mary Millward. "What else can I do—I who love him—I whose one desire is to

see him happy—even if his happiness means my own misery, even if his one chance of happiness is that he should never know, as I know, the truth ? "

§ 5

So the one woman in John Masterson's life ; while the other, a heap of limp and purple indolence on the big sofa flanking her boudoir fire, said, very steadily, for sign that she also had reached decision :

" You're absolutely right, my dear. I'll apologize. She won't say anything then. And if I try to make John get rid of her, it'll only mean fusses. And we don't want fusses. They wouldn't be worth while."

To which Rupert Starleigh, his gray eyes bloodshot, retorted, " Thank God, you've come to your senses " ; and so retorting, rose to go.

Irene let him kiss her before he went ; let John, too, kiss her when—half an hour later—he came back from tramping through the dusk.

PART THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

§ 1

No one has ever explained—and probably no one ever will—the root of that passion for horse-racing which distinguishes the Briton from the rest of humanity. Nor has even a Freudian psychologist pretended to find anything of sex or its perversity in the particular complex that causes most Britons of John Masterson's class and education to vision themselves—at least once in their life-times—" Winning the National."

Nevertheless, the complex exists, and our friend was reacting to it now as he woke—at seven o'clock of a sharp March morning—in the darkly panelled single bedroom which had been allotted to him the night previously at Grinstead Manor. " Wish I were riding myself," he thought, opening his eyes from a dreamless slumber.

And the thought grew on him while he drank his tea.

His brain, this morning, had ceased to bother itself. For him—barring one rather peculiar letter from Adamson which began with an apology for troubling him and ended, " I'm wondering whether, in the not improbable event of a by-election in Thameside South, you would be willing to stand again "—the last five days had been practically eventless. He had not even been conscious of the tension between Mary Millward and Irene; both women seeming, to his unpractised eye, entirely unaltered. Indeed, if Masterson had perceived any alteration during this short period, it had been an alteration for the better in his wife. She seemed happier, girlish again, almost the Deauville Irene in their moments of intimacy, in her submissiveness to his will.

Accordingly, John Masterson's mind was free to concentrate on his horse. The things of yesterday, the things of to-morrow must wait. To-day belonged to The Animal.

He deliberated about The Animal while he shaved, while he had his bath, while he dressed himself, somewhat less carelessly than his habit, in the thick tweeds and heavy boots which " good

old Rupert " had decreed for the day. " Take it from me, John," good old Rupert had said, " it'll be as cold as charity."

And " good old Rupert's " advice about that tweed suit seemed particularly apt to John Masterson, when he made his way out of his room, along the panelled passages and down the high-balustered Tudor staircase which are the main prides of Grinstead Manor. The Northern morning, despite its brightness, struck bitterly cold; and, warming his hands at the huge log-fire roaring under the wrought-iron blower in the square, mullion-windowed hall, it took The Animal's owner a fair three minutes' deliberation before he let himself out through the porched doorway, with the old arms weather-beaten above its lintel, into open air.

Grinstead Manor, however, seen for the first time in daylight, consoled him even for his shivers. The big black-and-white house with its age-curled eaves and its age-curved walls seemed actually tumbling into its own moat; its age-old gardens—though no longer kempt as of yore—as though Harry the Eighth might still pass to his hunting or his love-making along their clipped yew-hedges and their formal borders. While beyond the yew-hedges and the borders, fat Cheshire farm-land stretched in belts of fallow-green and arable umber, till the eyes lost both green and umber in the shadowy bases of the Cheshire hills.

" Topping," thought John Masterson; and found a moment's time to compare this gem of a place and his own. Compared with this place, Mastersleigh seemed altogether wanting. " I wonder why?" he asked himself; and " Can't make country places with just money," he decided, wandering back down a maze of quaint pathways where the first Spring rock-flowers were already lifting blue heads between the stones.

By now, the rest of the house was astir; and happening to glance up at the out-jutting windows of the long narrow room (some way from his own) whose rumoured ghostliness had so amused Irene, he saw that the chintz curtains had been drawn. Beyond those curtains, Coralie busied herself at a tall dressing-table; and through them, as he came within earshot, she poked her head.

" Pardon, monsieur," called Coralie. " But madame would know if you go to the race early as you said last night. Pardon, too, monsieur, that I call to you like this. But about this house, I cannot find my way."

" Tell your mistress to wait half-a-minute," called back Masterson. " And I'll come up."

The maid, however, seemed to have precise instructions.

" Madame would rather that you should not come up," she

went on, leaning half out of the window. " Madame has had one of her bad nights. She says to let her sleep again, to go on to the race alone. She herself will come later, with milord and the remainder of the party."

" All right."

Coralie's sallow face disappeared from the window; and Masterson made his way back—a trifle worried that Irene should not have slept—into the hall.

In the hall, stood Rupert; who said, removing the cigarette from between his lips, " Top of the morning, old man. Do you feel like a winner ? "

" I've felt worse," admitted Masterson.

" Seen Irene yet ? "

" No. Apparently she hasn't slept over well."

" I'm sorry to hear that."

Rupert Starleigh, smiling covertly as he did so, turned to fling his cigarette into the fire. But the smile hid a queer pang in Rupert Starleigh's conscience. " You've taken the plunge," said that conscience. " And now you've got to go through with things. Still—it's a putrid position. John's so infernally unsuspicious. And besides—even nowadays—there *are* limits. This man's your friend—and not only your friend. He's your client. You've made money out of him—barrels of money. You ought to be damn well ashamed."

" And so I am," decided Rupert Starleigh, turning from the fire. " Or at least so I should be—if I weren't so jolly well certain that if it hadn't been me, it would have been somebody else."

After which he picked up the previous night's paper; and was still browsing over the Stock Exchange columns when his father—a courtly gentleman of the old school, bald as a breakfast egg, clean-shaven above his fogled tie, and with practically no colour in his uninquisitive eyes—came beaming in, to announce, " Good morning, Masterson. We're in luck to-day. I've just had a telephone message from Knowsley. They say there's room for us in their box—at the Turn."

Following the Marquess, appeared the Ayrton girls; then two more males; then Jill Fernshaw, and lastly Ivor, looking a trifle wan.

" Had a poorish night, sir," explained Ivor, in answer to his host. " Your vintage port tempted me—and I fell."

But once they had gone in to breakfast, Ivor's wanness seemed to disappear; and watching him across the sun-slants from the low, embrasured windows, even the absorbed Masterson could not help remarking his gaiety.

Also—remarking that gaiety—Masterson remembered, not unpleasurably, Ivor's first coming to Carlton House Terrace. "There's nothing really wrong with the lad," he thought. "Nobody wants to work when they're that age. I know I didn't. And he *is* like Irene. All except his eyes—and his voice."

For it was softer than Irene's, that voice—almost pleading when it asked, breakfast over, "I say, John—it won't worry you, will it, if I go with *you* to the course?"

§ 2

From Grinstead Manor to Aintree Race Course, if you go by way of that tiny town which Mrs. Gaskell immortalized as "Cranford," is an exact thirty miles; and for the whole of those thirty miles, Ivor Carslake talked; and listening to his talk, John Masterson found it boyish enough.

Everything seemed to stimulate this boy—the weather, the road Rogers had taken, a couple of magpies that sailed chattering over the road, Knutsford Gaol, Warrington Town, the gates of Knowsley, the cars they passed, the cars that passed them. He had an eye for a car, had Ivor; could tell you the price of this make, the speed of that. He had an eye for a horse, too—at least in his own estimation. And of course he was confident—most youthfully and most gloriously confident—that The Animal would win.

"You think he'll win, don't you?" he asked, when they came in sight of the Canal; and Masterson, unwilling to damp his enthusiasm, answered, "I hope so, Ivor. I hope so. He's come on wonderfully during these last weeks; and if ever there was going to suit a stayer, we'll have it to-day."

For the day had not failed of its early promise; and as they rolled for Anchor Bridge the sun shone golden out of a cloudless sky.

On the bridge, Rogers—uncertain of the last of his way—pulled up for a moment, giving them a panorama of the course. It was early yet, barely eleven; and the two-and-a-quarter-mile triangle of the course practically deserted. To their left, by the Canal bank's long line of moored barges, the outside bookies had not finished hammering at their wooden booths. In the apex of the triangle, a farm-labourer ploughed with gray horses. Gulls wheeled after the plough; and beyond, above the flapping red-and-white of the flags at Becher's, only one train had as yet made the high embankment. While to their right, the big brick-red

stands beyond the big brick-red aeroplane hangars were still quite empty of spectators.

Rogers, guided by a policeman, drove on again ; slowly, down the Belling Road towards the car enclosure ; and while he did so, Ivor's heart dropped a distinct beat. Supposing The Animal *didn't* win—didn't even get a place ?

The mere possibility set his knees wobbling. " Four hours," he thought, " four more mortal hours of suspense. But it's all right. Damn it, it's *got* to be all right."

All the same, Ivor's knees still felt as though they wanted to wobble when he climbed out of the car, when he followed his brother-in-law from the enclosure, through the stands, past the saddling ring and out of the trainer's door in the direction of the stables. And his eyes, too, seemed to be wobbling : so that he had only a confused picture of the first of the crowd, professionals for the most part, waiting, in a ragged queue, for admittance to the course.

The ragged queue stared at Masterson as they made through the door. So did a jockey in his tweeds. So did a smart stable-boy. So did a down-at-heel-looking sharp who ran after him calling, " Good luck to yer, sir. Good luck to The Hanimile," and touched a greasy cap when Masterson (always an easy mark !) flung him an easy shilling. But Ivor observed none of these stares ; observed nothing until they had arrived, past a saluting constable, in the brick rectangle of " New " stables.

There, Tom Withers was already waiting for them ; and there, on guard (on guard is the only word) outside the locked door of The Animal's box, stood Ted Luckett.

" He's at a hundred to eight, Mister John," said Tom Withers. " And I've just put my pony on him. That's a biggish bet for me. Same as it was for your poor dear father. Pity your poor dear father isn't alive. His last bargain's looking pretty like a horse this morning. Not that looks count—and of course we've got three fairly hot customers against us."

Thus—cautious as ever—old Tom. But there was little caution—except in the conspiratorial lowering of his voice—about Ted Luckett.

" Look at that, sir," whispered Luckett, jerking a scarred thumb at the white name painted on the stable-door. " Manifesto ! He had this box when Williamson rode him in 'ninety-nine ; and if it was good enough for Manifesto to win from, it ought to be about good enough for us. Travelled ? " This to Ivor. " He travelled like a prince, sir. *I* saw to that. And

he'll do some travelling at three o'clock—express—or I'm a Dutchman."

The jockey's words comforted Ivor Carslake; nor did The Animal's appearance, when the four of them passed into his box, detract from the comfort of them. The big wall-eyed horse, seen in the half-light which filtered in through the barred window, seemed all of a winner. The past year had simmered him down. Loose, he no longer kicked; no longer bared his yellow teeth at all and sundry who came near him; hardly even laid back his ears when Masterson gentled his strawberry-roan muzzle and ran an inquiring hand under his long strawberry-roan mane.

"Couldn't be fitter, could you, old boy?" pronounced Masterson; and again the words brought their comfort to Ivor's mind. With Luckett certain and John confident things must be—damn it all, they simply *must* be—all right.

Tom Withers, however—after they emerged from the box into cold sunshine, and Luckett, with an exaggerated gesture, had re-padlocked the stable-door—set Ivor's nerves once more a-jangle. "Nothing's all right in 'chasing," said old Tom in answer to a tactful query. "Especially over this course, with a field of thirty-four."

And "this course"—when presently seen by Ivor—confirmed, and doubly confirmed, the trainer's judgment.

For Aintree—as John Masterson and Ivor Carslake tramped it after Luckett had been given his final instructions—is no sight for a nervous youngster whose whole future depends on one particular horse getting first to the finish; and at each of those raspers—sixteen in all, and fourteen of them twice for the leaping—which make the Grand National the world's test of a horse's stamina and a jockey's horsemanship, the boy's faint heart sank deeper into his natty boots.

The first two "regulations" seemed bad enough; the third—with its ditch banked to the guard-rail, and its man-high, man thick fir above—set Ivor's imagination reeling. Supposing The Animal failed to clear that ditch! What would it mean to him?

Yet worse was to come. Two fences more; and they were at Becher's. Fir again here—hard as a wall—and below it, on the landing side, five-foot-six of brook. Could The Animal clear that brook—and the next gorse—and beyond it, ditched again between the curving white of the rails, the "Canal Turn," where a big horse, jumping for thousands, must wheel as a polo pony wheels or lose lengths before Valentine's? "God alone knows," thought Ivor Carslake.

Masterson halted for a few moments between the Canal Turn and Valentine's; and while he did so, Ivor surveyed the early comers of the crowd. It was out for its pleasure, that crowd. Niggers were playing to it, and from the stand at the Turn men and women were flinging coppers. "They don't care which horse wins," thought Ivor. "What's it to them? A few quid. But to me—to me . . ."

Masterson tramped on; and perforce the boy followed. Valentine's Brook seemed even more terrible than Becher's. Looking back at it, he shuddered; shuddered at each of the three obstacles beyond, shuddered again when they stood in the famous "Chair" with the dark spruce, nearly four foot thick, towering above his head.

He was afraid now—afraid to his very marrow-bones; and by the time they reached that fifteen-foot of low hedge and muddy water which fronts the Stands, he would have sold his soul for suspense to be over.

But since souls, especially on race-courses, are not a marketable commodity, he took a drink at the Grand Stand bar instead, and then another drink—surreptitiously while John Masterson, talking with a brother owner, opined that the turf was "almost good enough to play cricket on."

And, "Cricket!" thought the over-hearing Ivor. "Cricket! Christ!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

§ 1

JUST about the time Ivor finished that second drink, Ivor's sister and Rupert Starleigh started for the course.

They started last of the house-party; and as she took her place in the bucket-seat of the Vauxhall, the tiniest smile of sly approbation crinkled the red corners of Irene's mouth.

"*Enfin seuls!*" smiled Irene. "How did you manage to shake dear Phyllis off?"

"Easily enough—told her she'd be devilish uncomfortable in the dickey."

Rupert, also smiling, fiddled his gears from first to second; and shot off down the curving gravel drive in the wake of the other car.

"You comfy?" he asked, fiddling again as they swept past the black-and-white lodge.

"Rather."

"Then hang on while we give the governor's hearse a miss in baulk."

They gave "the governor's hearse" its miss in baulk, waving as they roared by; and after that, for a good three miles of open road, neither of them spoke. Him—as always—motion contented; her—as rarely—thought.

"I ought to be sorry," she thought: "but I'm not sorry. I haven't a single regret. Yes I have though—one. Why did I wait so long before I took a lover? I *need* a lover; and Rupert never bores me, as John bores me, with those awful talks about the poor."

On which she found tongue again, saying—as Rupert, knowing the county of his birth, wrenched suddenly into a side-road: "You haven't told me if I look nice this morning. Do I look nice? Do I please you?"

"Please me!" Rupert's left hand abandoned the wheel, rested for a moment on the fur at her lap. "You know you please me."

"Then kiss me."

He kissed her as he drove—lightly, on her wind-blown cheek—and while he did so, her knee pressed for his.

"You're not sorry?" she asked.

"What's the use of being sorry?"

"Then you are?"

"Occasionally."

"When?"

"Only when I'm with John. John's so decent."

"But, my dear, he's so dull."

"Do you know—I think I'd rather not talk about John."

"Oh, all right. Have it your own way."

He had it his own way; and sulking with him, she returned to thought. His image, reflected in the Triplex, shewed her that he was annoyed.

His annoyance struck her as peculiarly childish. They were funny creatures—men. Always harking back. Always repenting. As though harking back, or repentance, ever did any good!

Nevertheless—presently, when he had regained his temper and their side-road had brought them on to the main turnpike for Warrington—Irene herself harked back, remembering another drive to another race-course, Sandown. She had been almost in love with John then; certainly out of love with Rupert. Whereas now—now she was certainly in love with Rupert; almost out of love with John. "But I'm not *quite* out of love with John," she told herself. "I could still like him if only—if only he didn't bore me so, if only he weren't so horribly respectable. And I could never like Rupert in the same way, because Rupert isn't cut out for a husband. He—he knows too much about women."

And yet, how little Rupert really knew about women! How little any *man* knew about them. That Frenchwoman, for instance—strange, why the picture of her should flash through one's mind—that French *cocotte* with the *blonde cendrée* hair and the black pearls who had been with Bobbie Strut at Deauville. What did any man really know about *her?* "Nothing," decided Irene Masterson. "But I know everything about her because . . . Oh, well, just because."

The reason of her knowledge shocked her a little: so did another picture—a picture of the immediate past—of herself waiting tense among unaccustomed sheets for the tap of Rupert's cautious knuckles on the panelled door of that long narrow room; listening tense to the hushed whisper of Rupert's voice; sitting tense as his gray eyes peered at her in passion across the candle-

light by the big four-poster bed. But it was no use being shocked now. And besides, she *liked* being shocked—*liked* that queer feeling of guilt. . . .

Once into Warrington, however, all pictures of the past vanished, as strokes wiped from a slate, from the impressionable tablet of Irene's mind. All this long straggling town—it seemed to her imagination—was headed for the National. Cars, trams, charabancs packed its narrow streets. From Latchford Swing Bridge to the river took them a good seven minutes; from the river to the highroad again, an ample ten. All about them, people seemed to be shouting, singing, waving flags and drinking from bottles. All about them was that particular excitement which is typical of Great Britain on its way to some great race.

And presently, out of Warrington, with the car opened up again, roaring in and out between the trams, leaving now this over-loaded flivver and now that a mile and a mile behind, Rupert, too, fell prey to excitement. "Damn the traffic," groused Rupert every time he had to brake and change speed. "Damn it, sir—keep to your left."

His swearing amused her; and it amused her, too, that, peering backwards through the dust as they crawled right-handed for Knowsley, she could see no trace of the other car.

"They must be miles behind," she said; and he, less excited, "There's no hurry. It isn't one yet—and there's a private way to our box."

A quarter of an hour more gave Irene her first glimpse of Aintree.

The huge course was no longer practically deserted. Train after train puffed along its high embankments. The hump of Anchor Bridge, the canal path, the Canal Stand, the farm at the right of their road, the fields between the farm and the canal were all blackening with people.

A hundred yards beyond the farm, Rupert pulled in to his left, and drew up by a gate in the hedge. A policeman guarded that gate. As the car stopped, he saluted; helped Irene to alight. "This way, my lady," he said, opening the gate for her; and to Rupert, "The motor will be all right here, my lord."

Both of them laughed at the implication in the words; and while they were making their way across the field towards the canal bank, Rupert asked, "Do you wish it were true?"

"No. I prefer you as you are," retorted a thoroughly truthful Irene.

By then, they had reached the towing-path. Just opposite, across the water, in the one vacant space between the barges, lay

a big pontoon. Rupert signalled to the men in charge of the pontoon, and as it was rope-hauled over, a little group of strangers joined them.

"Take us," smiled a painted young woman in a very expensive chinchilla coat. "I'll never get a seat at the Turn if you don't."

"Sorry," said Rupert. "But I'm afraid we can't. Rules and regulations, don't you know. This pontoon's private."

"Well—I call that mean."

The girl in the chinchilla coat pouted; whispered something to a male companion; waited till the pontoon touched the bank; and then set off, still pouting, along the towing-path for Anchor Bridge.

"You wouldn't have done that if you'd been alone," said Irene as they stepped aboard. "She was a jolly pretty girl."

"Was she? I'm afraid I didn't notice."

The subtlety of Rupert's compliment set Irene's vanity tingling; and when they came ashore she let her gloved hand rest for a good second longer than was necessary in his. The contact—she could feel—thrilled him. He took her arm; pressed it to his side as an attendant escorted them between the streaming crowd to their special glass-roofed box by the Canal Stand.

The Canal Stand itself—and draughty enough it looked to Irene's luxurious eyes—was already packed; but at its one gate people were still fighting for admission; and all about its creosoted timbers swirled more people—struggling this way, struggling that, almost pushing one another into the water in their struggles.

"Jolly old scrum, eh?" ejaculated Rupert.

The attendant left them at the foot of the steps which led up to the private box; and climbing these, they found themselves the first of the party to arrive.

"Better bag the best seat while you can," went on Rupert. "Wonderful sight, ain't it?"

It was a wonderful sight; and for a good five minutes—while Rupert pointed out this celebrated leap and that—Irene studied it in silence.

Immediately below them, lay Valentine's; directly opposite—where the narrow brook cut its curving track along the edge of the plough—Becher's. Just on their left, not sixty yards away, was the Turn. At each of these jumps, the white rails were literally buried under a ten-deep mass.

"And it's the same all round," said Rupert, handing her his glasses.

She took the glasses, focussed them, swept them here and there

about the course. The glasses shewed her a clock-tower, the hands of its clock pointing the quarter-to-two; trains halted along the embankments; flags; green turf; the tripods of many cinema-cameras—and always, people.

There were people in the trains; people standing by the trains; people at every one of the sixteen fences; people along all the rails, in the car-enclosure, by the bookies' booths; people —thousands upon thousands of black and bee-like people— clustering from rails to roof of the last place on which her glasses rested, the distant stands.

"Wouldn't we have seen better from those stands?" she asked, taking the glasses from her eyes.

"Question of opinion," said Rupert. "Personally—I'd rather be here." Then he began to talk about The Animal's chances: while she—her attention wandering from him—studied the crowd.

It was rather an unusual crowd—she thought; a quaint mixture of all classes. Here went a soldierly-looking youth in a hunting bowler, a sporty girl in leopard-skin and chic tailor-made; there a couple of Irish priests; there a coal-miner with his whippet, a Liverpool bank-clerk, a blousy barge-woman with three grubby kids clinging to her ragged skirt; there a brace of uniformed chauffeurs carrying a tiffin-basket, and a red-cheeked octogenarian in white spats and a check tail-coat. Items— an old man in a greasy yachting-cap, which shifted on his scalp every time his raucous voice failed to syncopate with the plunk of his banjo, had just been moved off the turf by a mounted policeman; a bookie's clerk from the near-by booths seemed to be pursuing an uncertain client; a card-seller was grumbling at being asked for change; a horse-ambulance was taking up position mid-way between Becher's and Valentine's; and a stretcher-party had settled down to wait for casualties by the cinema-tripod at the Turn.

These things—rather than her lover's conversation—kept Irene amused till the second flat race (of which they only caught a glimpse); till the arrival of the rest of the party. Shortly after which she perceived first John and then Ivor making their slow way to the box.

Ivor—it seemed to her when he finally climbed up to them —looked "a bit rattled." His brown pupils were dilated; two spots of unaccustomed red glowed hectic in his cheeks. She asked him, teasingly, "What's the matter with *you*?" and noticed, as he answered her, "There's nothing the matter with *me*, thank you—you're not looking so bally fit yourself," that his clean-shaven lips quivered a little over his good teeth.

But that, she put down to the cold ; and about her husband she noticed nothing at all. *He*—all through that half-hour while they waited for the big race—seemed his usual self, the calmest the least anxious of them all.

§ 2

John Masterson's calm, however—when, with the high clock on his left pointing ten minutes to three, he unslung his fat binoculars and took up his position between his wife and brother-in-law at the front of the box—was purely superficial.

Always, in his life, there had been certain moments when imagination functioned even more clearly than actual sight ; and of such a moment he grew aware while he focussed his glasses on the red edge of the aeroplane hangars ; and, sweeping them round past the huge black ant-heaps of the stands and the now-crowded car-enclosure, let them rest—unquivering—on the long white line of the starting-gate.

His mind—in that particular moment—was not with the various people in the box, not with the starting-gate, not even with The Animal, but with (almost as it were inside) the mind of Luckett. He actually imagined himself to be Luckett. By now, Luckett was being thrown to his saddle, feeling the thin racing-irons through the thin soles of his boots. He rode a bit long, did Luckett—and always in the same rawhide leathers. A superstitious fellow—hadn't liked his number, Thirteen. Still—once led out of the ring and on to the course, he'd forget all about superstition, remember only old Tom's orders, " Hold hard to Becher's ; slow at the Turn ; don't let 'em bustle you till you get to the Water. Go all you know there—but don't keep on going. . . ."

Luckett was on the course now, on Parade, with The Animal kicking like fun, hogging his back and tossing at the big snaffle for the stable boy to let go his head. The boy had let go The Animal's head. He was cantering past the Stands, fighting all the way, shewing the white of his wall-eye, leaning hard on the double-reined bit. Others, too, were cantering past the Stands—thirty-four of them, all cantering towards the post. What a moment for a horseman. By Gad, what a moment !

And as—in the circle of his glasses—his actual eyes watched those thirty-odd, tiny, mile-away horse-figures emerge from behind the humps of the car-enclosure and stream towards the gate, Masterson's imagination gave him all the frozen thrill of that moment : The tapes—the horses wheeling for the tapes—the

starter's voice, " Get back there, you, get back "—the strain of leathers—the snuffle of nostrils—the clink of an iron against an iron—and ahead, straight ahead between two ears pricked as for battle, the green billiard-table of the turf, and the deeper green barring the turf, and the red flags and the white flags flapping as the silk colours flapped against the cold skin of one's back in the rattle of the breeze.

Meanwhile, the circle of his glasses swept forward—to the first fence—to the second—to the rail-and-ditch—to Becher's. Just beyond Becher's, the clock indicated one minute past three. The circle of the glasses swept back; held steady on the white line of the gate. They were all at the post now—the whole thirty-four of them—wheeling and wheeling. Now they were steady—all in a cavalry line. Why didn't the tapes go up? Why the devil didn't the tapes fly up?

Up!

And, " They're off," says a voice, Ivor's, at Masterson's ear.

Followed a minute fraction of a second in which it seemed as though the cavalry line stood stock still; then it charged, blackly, past the thrown-back barriers across the tan of the Belling Road.

In that charge, no colours, no distances were distinguishable. For nearly five hundred and fifty fenceless yards the race might have been a straight dark wave. Then the wave rose; swept over the first regulation; broke in the sweeping; swept on. One horse was down. " Mine? " thought Masterson; and as quickly, " No." For the fallen horse had been on the left of the line.

Over the second regulation another horse fell; and the line echeloned. In echelon it held for the ditch, cleared the ditch. Two more down! But not The Animal. Colours were distinguishable now; and distances. Six led—among them, Maryland, the gray; Seely Sussex; Bridge of Arran. The Animal lay in the ruck. So they came to the fourth leap; and at the fifth yet another went down. Masterson saw a white jacket leave the saddle, fall, stagger up as the loose horse went galloping on.

" Is it all right? " asked another voice, Irene's, at his elbow.

He answered, automatically, " Yes: Luckett's all right "—and watched the ruck open out as the leaders went helter-skelter, all in a bunch, for Becher's.

A second later, his glasses switched to Becher's; held there. In the circle, the five-foot thorn above Becher's, the flags and

the faces beside it and the brook below, shewed still as a still photograph. But there were colours in the still photograph—green, and the red of a flag, the white of the rails. And now, into the still of the coloured photograph, raced action—six horses at stretch-gallop, six jackets sitting them, six jackets leaning as the horses gathered hocks under belly, as their forehands lifted—lifted to clear it clean.

All six were over—over and coming at the fence before the Turn. Bridge of Arran had led them—with the gray fourth—and fifteen-year-old Quartermaster, twice a winner, barely a length behind.

And now came the ruck, with a loose horse among them, and close on that loose horse's flanks, his own. Even at that distance, it was obvious that Luckett had not forgotten his orders. The Animal was in hand—well in hand. He took Becher's like a hunter ; checking a stride, poising a stride ; then up and over with a foot to spare.

As The Animal went over, Masterson whipped the glasses from his eyes.

His naked eyes gave him one of the greatest pictures man may see : horses and jackets clearing the fence beyond Becher's—clearing it and coming for the Turn. The leaders slowed a little as they came for the Turn. They were still in the same order : Bridge of Arran's chestnut a length ahead ; behind him, noses to croups, Seely Sussex, Hop o' me Thumb and bay Glorious, the only mare in the race ; behind them, losing distance, gallant Quartermaster and the gray. And watching them, watching the flash of horse-coats, the flash of the jackets in the sunlight, sheer sportsmanship almost drove the thought of his own part in this race from Masterson's mind.

They were at it now—the huge fence hiding all but the heads and the cap-colours. He saw a mustard jacket, a black cap swerve out, swerve in, and go for it slanting ; saw the seventeen-hand chestnut rise ; saw his forefeet outstretch like a cat's, his hindfeet gather under, turn him as he landed, hurl him forward again—forward for Valentine's.

Glorious, Seely Sussex, Hop o' me Thumb followed the chestnut safely over. After them, neck and neck, raced Quartermaster and the gray. The gray was on the inside ; rose at it like a greyhound—but rose too late. Masterson had a glimpse of him in mid-air, a glimpse of fore-hoofs scattering spruce, of a green jacket catapulted, of hind-hoofs vertical. Then Maryland was down—and Quartermaster with him—and The Animal swerving, swerving to miss them as he pelted behind.

" Steady," thought Masterson, " steady " ; and just as that thought went flashing through his mind, his horse, half hidden by the fence, did steady. Then the blue cap and plum-coloured jacket leaned forward, and he saw Luckett's face. Luckett's face—it seemed to him in that infinitesimal fraction of a second—was all bone ; the horse under him all steel. Steel springs ! He took off like a jumping-jack ; seemed actually to double-jump in mid-air ; landed practically on all fours ; landed safe ; spun like a polo-pony—and hared on. The bone-face grinned as they landed ; grinned straight ahead. . . .

One refused ; three more fell, at the Turn. But Masterson did not notice their falling. His naked eyes were below him—directly below. Over the green of that turf below, the four leaders shot for Valentine's ; shot over ; shot away. Six lengths behind—the loose horse dropping back from him—raced The Animal. The Animal *was* racing now, racing to be up with his leaders. He flew Valentine's like a driven partridge, flew it and galloped on.

Someone—Ivor—gave a gasp of sheer joy at Masterson's side. Someone—Irene—told him, " We're going to win. Oh John, I believe we're going to win." And nine more horses negotiated the Turn, gathered speed over the turf, went steeplechasing for Valentine's. But none of these things penetrated to John Masterson's mind.

His mind was glued—as his glasses were glued—on the race. The race was going away from him. And The Animal was going up. Up and up ! Orders or no orders !

And at that, violently, imagination resumed its function. Once again, he was actually Luckett—The Animal under him, the eleventh ahead. A rasper, that eleventh—though all of them looked the same. And The Animal seemed to know it. Nothing to be done with him—except take that one pull and sit down. The last of the leaders had cleared it. The loose horse had fallen out. Five others were pelting behind. What a size the thing was ! Still, this horse could do it.

Now !

Imaginatively, Masterson's hands gave The Animal his head ; imaginatively, his knees tightened on the saddle-flaps ; imaginatively, he felt The Animal's forehand lift against his thighs ; saw the sudden gray of the six-foot ditch, the sudden green of the five-foot fir flash under—and knew himself over—over and racing on.

The rails now—yards on yards of them—and faces, faces that opened at one as one galloped by. And now the Stands

—and this side of the Stands, the "Chair," the Water. Orders to go there. Steady a second, though. Here's the "Chair"—another pull. Cleared it. Now forrard. Who's this just behind? Never mind him. Pace at the Water. Pace! Fly it! Jumping Jehosophat! *how* the horse flew it—nearly a yard to spare. . . .

"Second time round," gasped a voice, Ivor's, at Masterson's ear; and this time the voice penetrated, killing imagination dead.

The horses had disappeared for a second; were re-appearing, tiny beyond the car-enclosure. Seven seemed to be still in it—seven more, two riderless among them, lay hopelessly out-distanced. The tiny horses grew as he watched them through his glasses. Now they were at the first again; now at the second, at the third. And at the next he could just make out plum-colour-and-blue. Plum-colour-and-blue lay fourth. No—still fifth. Going up, though. And fast! Would challenge beyond Becher's.

For the second time in those six hectic minutes which had elapsed since the start, the circle of Masterson's glasses held steady at Becher's Brook. Seven horses were racing for the Brook. And The Animal had gone up a place; was going like beano after Bridge of Arran and Hop o' me Thumb. Seely Sussex must have fallen. Glorious, too. But a new one was in it—leading. Mauve, and white stripes! Porchester's colours! Triple Garnet—the third of those "hot customers" old Tom had distrusted.

He watched Triple Garnet over. How he flung it behind him! Perfect. But the others were over, too—drop-jumping like bunny-rabbits. And here came The Animal—forehand high, forehand breasting it, hindquarters under, and away. Third now—must be third—had gained a good length in his leaping.

Again, Masterson whipped the binoculars from his eyes; and as he did so felt his heart thumping—thumping like a sledge-hammer with the hope of victory. Hop o' me Thumb was beat—nearly all the rest of 'em were beat—only three of 'em in it.

Three of 'em—mauve-and-white; mustard-and-black; plum-colour-and-blue! Triple Garnet took the fence between Becher's and the Turn as a circus-horse takes the pole. He led by three lengths. No lead that—with another mile of going—and the run-in. And The Animal was challenging Bridge of Arran—challenging him level—neck and neck over that fence before the Turn.

Triple Garnet checked canny at the Turn; but kept his lead

to it, rose like a bird to it—rose and flew over. After him, close after him—and canny, too—came The Animal.

Now the big fence hid The Animal. Now he came slanting at it. Now he was in mid-air. Now he was landing—landing and turning—Bridge of Arran behind. And now, as the Animal landed, Masterson saw Luckett sit down in his saddle—sit down and sit still.

Triple Garnet still led him—but the lead was dwindling as they headed for Valentine's. A length now—a bare length. And both of them below him.

"Stout fellow," thought Masterson, "Stout fellow. You've got it. But don't bustle him. Keep hold of him—keep hold of him till you're nearly home."

And even as that thought flashed through his brain, he saw Triple Garnet take off; saw Luckett's legs go back, his hands forward; saw The Animal gather hocks under belly to fly Valentine's; saw The Animal's forehand clear Valentine's; saw his hocks flex to clear Valentine's—saw him touch fir there—touch it and fall. . . .

§ 3

The thing had happened so instantaneously, so disastrously, that, for appreciable seconds thereafter, even John Masterson's steady nerves came near to cracking. The race went by—went under—went away. But if he saw the race at all, he saw it only as some madly moving vision: flash of colours, fling of turf, gleam of plates: a crazy kaleidoscope of senseless action flickering thin against a stark screen of sunlight, beyond which—only reality in the picture—lay a huddled heap of plum-colour-and-blue and a strawberry-roan horse that struggled . . . struggled feebly to rise. Also—somewhere in the picture—was a face: a boy's face: gray as ashes: its mouth open: its brown eyes starting from its skull.

Those seconds passed, however, and the last horse over Valentine's, poise came back to Masterson. His vision cleared. Directly below, people had already broken on to the course. He realized that he, too, must break on to the course; must get to Luckett, to The Animal—and so realizing, started to make his way out of the box.

No one tried to stop him; only one person—Ivor—followed. Reaching the top of the steps, he saw that dozens of men had clambered the guard-rail of Valentine's; that several were actually on top of the fence. The Animal lay directly below the

fence—still struggling feebly to rise. "Hadn't you better stay where you are?" he said to Ivor.

But Ivor continued to follow—down the steps, into the thick of the crowd. They had to breast their way through the crowd —to fight their way over the rails, to fight their way on to the course.

The huddled heap of plum-colour-and-blue was stirring by the time they got on to the course. By it, knelt an ambulance man, a constable, one of the cinema-operators. As they came up, another ambulance man brought the stretcher.

"No bones broken, sir," said the first ambulance man. "He'll be round in a minute or so."

"Good," said Masterson, "good"; and turned to his horse.

The Animal had given up the useless struggle. Broken-backed, he lay as he had fallen. Approaching him, kneeling down by him, Masterson felt his very bowels become water.

"Got to be done," he said to himself. "Got to be done." And aloud, to Ivor, "The vet! Find out if they've sent for the vet."

The thing which had to be done horrified him: so that the whole scene became unreal again, crazy. He was hardly conscious of the people about him, of their comments, "Poor brute—that's the chap he belongs to—'ad 'arf-a-quid on him, I did"; of Ivor's quivering, "They sent at once—he'll be here any moment"; of the crowd cheering as Triple Garnet's number rose first on the Canal Turn board.

Yet all the while they waited for that thing which had to be done, he was conscious—fully and acutely and cruelly conscious —of The Animal's eyes. They were so terribly resigned, those eyes—no reproach in them—no pain—only foreknowledge: a dumb, dreadful, staring foreknowledge of the end.

And when, mercifully, the loud end came, and the poor sweat-sodden body shivered and lay still, the stare of those eyes remained with John Masterson: so that he saw nothing of the look in those other eyes—his brother-in-law's, fear-stricken, the brown pupils swollen to the iris, the whites bloodshot under the ashy lids.

John Masterson's wife, of course, Rupert Starleigh—being the almost perfect lover—had long since hurried away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

§ 1

As a race, we English are possessed of many excellent qualities; but rarely do we number, among these qualities, that gift of imaginative foresight which distinguishes your Latin and your Jew.

A Jew's (Rose, during the short period in question, was absorbed with the final polish of a play), an Italian's, a Spaniard's or a Frenchman's imagination—had any such chanced to visit Eighteen A, Carlton House Terrace during the ten days which followed Masterson's return from Grinstead—could not have failed to foresee, from a thousand and one tiny signs, some emotional catastrophe. For the atmosphere of Masterson's house had again altered; was fully charged now—every molecule of it—for explosion.

Yet the principal people in that house, being English, remained insensitive to its atmosphere. They were like children, one feels. And most childish of all was Ivor Carslake. Because, throughout those ten days, Ivor Carslake had only one impulse, to "go the pace," to forget.

One day, of course—the boy could not help knowing—people would find out how he had settled his bets on the National, and all those other bets, and Milly's dressmaker's bill, and his account at Ciro's. But that day couldn't—damn it, it just couldn't—be to-day. To-day would be all right. So would to-morrow. Then there were the Easter holidays—another respite.

Over Easter, everybody would be away. He and Milly were going away, too—just from the Saturday night to the Monday afternoon—in one of John's cars. John wouldn't mind their "borrowing" one of the cars. And besides, John wouldn't know anything about it. Because John and Irene were off yachting—devilish good game yachting, pity one couldn't be in two places at once—for the best part of a fortnight.

So one Carslake: while the other—for all that she now imagined herself the complete woman of the world—behaved with an equal childishness, and a far greater contempt of her own danger.

It is doubtful, indeed, whether Irene Masterson—secure in

the illusions of an abnormal temperament—ever succeeded in visualizing actual danger. Rupert, it seemed to her, was so much too adroit, John so much too phlegmatic for any "real fuss" to develop itself out of a situation which she, for her part, was not beyond admitting, in those rare moments when she dallied with introspection, to be ecstatically bizarre.

Nor, in those rare moments of introspection, could Irene—one mentions this with diffidence, again stressing the abnormality of her temperament—ever succeed in visualizing herself for what she actually was. Because the seventh commandment (she happened to think about it one evening when Rupert took her to a film which dealt with the whole ten) had obviously never been intended to apply in the case of a woman who had never really understood the meaning of that "divine" word, Romance, until now.

For in all of us—deny it though most of us do—is that craving for the thing men call Romance; and if Irene Masterson took her romance as she did—sordidly, clandestinely, deceiving now the one of her men and now the other—one thing at least, abnormality apart, she did have to excuse her, and that thing, youth.

Neither youth, however, nor the general childishness of her behaviour, led Irene Masterson into exacerbating the position between herself and Mary Millward. She was still jealous of Mary—as she would have been jealous of any other nubile woman who happened to be of her household. But she never really imagined that Mary *knew*; and so, having apologized to her as arranged, went out of her way—whenever they met—to be particularly nice.

Still very wifty, you observe, this wife of our friend John Masterson; and a little wifty—though it would have horrified her to realize it—his secretary!

For Mary Millward—almost from the very moment when her mental wall fell headlong—had succeeded in deluding herself to a new philosophy. And that philosophy told her, over and over and over again as the days went by, "The more you love John, the finer your love, the more is it your duty to face only the actual facts—and never the possibilities—of a very horrible situation."

That the situation was horrible—torturingly so—Mary Millward had too much commonsense to deny. Misinterpreting Irene's original apology, she took it, and each new niceness, for a confirmation of Irene's guilt, for a plea of, "You know—and I know that you know—but we're both women, so you mustn't

give me away." And this imagined plea nauseated her more than anything she had yet experienced in life.

Other things, too—intimate domestic things—nauseated her. And once—returning late from a theatre to overhear Irene telling her Swiss maid, " Monsieur is sleeping in my room to-night, so don't call us till I ring "—she could have died for pain.

Yet the situation—childish though this may seem to outsiders—did not seem, to Mary Millward's newly acquired philosophy, alterable. She saw it, delusively, for static, for an eternal permanency ; and accordingly—despite the nausea and a certain hard hopeless heart-ache which assailed her every time she looked upon John—accepted her rôle very much as the others accepted theirs; with more courage perhaps, and considerably more balance, but with the same blindness to danger, the same contempt for to-morrow.

§ 2

And yet—childish, though they all were—the most child-like of them all was our friend John Masterson when, at half-past ten o'clock in the morning of Monday, April the sixth, he returned from a brisk constitutional, let himself in with his latch-key, and went straight upstairs for the business of the day.

Everything about that day seemed in combination to elate him. To begin with, Spring seemed to have come. Walking, he had been conscious of the turn of the year, of a bloom on the trees in Birdcage Walk, of daffodil spear-heads bursting gold by St. James' Lake,

And the turn of the year seemed to have rid him of a haunting: so that, for the first time since his return from Aintree, he could remember The Animal calmly, without seeing that dreadful, staring foreknowledge in the poor beast's eyes, without reproaching himself because his racing had been the means of bringing a dumb friend to death.

Already one of that dumb friend's hoofs stood—silver-mounted and set with a little silver plate commemorating his end—on the ink-stained mahogany of Masterson's desk ; and, contemplating that relic as he entered his sanctum, he told himself that The Animal had died, as gallant horses and gallant men should die, in action.

" You did your best," he thought. " A man could have done no more."

There were letters under the hoof : among them, one from

old Tom. "Luckett's about again," wrote old Tom. "He hopes you're not blaming him for what happened. I've my eye on another mare. And Samarcand's colt is coming on fine. It'll be great if we can breed winners again, down here at Mastersleigh."

Good old Tom! A man couldn't work all the time. He must have his pleasures.

So for a while John Masterson—business forgotten—contemplated his pleasures: next year's pheasant-shooting, next year's hunting (he had made no mistake when he bought Peter the Great), a win or two for his stable—and finally, his yacht.

It seemed ages since he had been aboard his yacht; since he had gone honeymooning on her with Irene. But now, the *Minotaur* was in commission again. Twenty-four hours more, and they would be in the Solent, steaming for open sea. Pity—that they would not be alone upon the sea, that Rupert must be with them, and Tom Trevor, and Tom Trevor's wife. For she was so newly adorable, so really altered, this Irene: this happy girl-wife just budding into her womanhood; this submissive girl-wife who had whispered to him (could it have been only last night?) "John—don't be angry with me—don't leave off loving me because I haven't given you a child."

As though he could ever be really angry with her! As though he imagined it her fault that she should have given him no child!

Eleven o'clock—striking loudly from the sanctum's old-fashioned black timepiece—called Masterson to work. But work, too—on this particular day—seemed destined to elate him. The Humblestone dwelling—wrote Aubreystone—was "practically done." The moment the holidays were over, he could start to demolish Archer's Rents. As a suggestion—couldn't they house the Archer's Rents folk in the Humblestone Street dwelling, "at any rate until their own place is done?"

"Sound scheme, that," he decided; and worked on, finding now this favourable news and now that in every item of his correspondence, until Mary Millward came to warn him, "Don't forget, Mr. Masterson, that you promised to give Mr. Adamson and Mr. Beneforth half-an-hour if they could be here before twelve."

And in those few words dwelt yet another elation of that altogether elating day.

He tried very hard to avoid that particular elation, thinking, as the door closed behind Mary's back, "I ought to be sorry that Sparlington's so ill. Sparlington's a human being—

even if he is a revolutionary." Nevertheless, that particular elation continued to grow; and by the time Mary brought in his two visitors, the thought seemed a mere overdoing of his scruples.

Adamson and Beneforth, apparently, had no scruples. Scrutinizing their two faces, the graybearded and the clean-shaven, across his desk-top, it was quite obvious to him that they both wanted Sparlington to die.

"As I wrote to you," said Adamson, after a few preliminary sentences, "I don't think there's much doubt Sparlington *is* going to die. His agent seems pretty certain about it, and so does his party. They had a meeting at the Baths last night, with that young rat, Percy Cobbold, for their chief speaker. Apparently, he's their prospective candidate. Lady Clara was there, too. *She* spoke for nearly twenty minutes. A dangerous young woman, Mr. Masterson. If Sparlington's illness does turn out fatal, and if I'm right in thinking Cobbold's after the seat, it'll mean as tough a fight as the last."

"Tougher!" added Beneforth; and went on, his ferret-face wrinkling with doubt, "A by-election, you see, is so very much worse than a general one. We shall have apathy to combat—and the swing of the pendulum. And besides, I don't mind telling you that even our own people aren't too terribly pleased with the way things have gone since we took office."

After which Adamson came plump back to the purpose of his original letter, saying: "It's no good beating about the bush, Mr. Masterson. *Our* party won't have a dog's earthly unless you'll consent to stand."

§ 3

Note here—for the first and only time in our story—the mysterious workings of that force which modern folk, not believing in the Greek *anangkae*, call Coincidence.

It took Adamson and Beneforth—neither of them subtle enough to perceive that the directness of their premature proposal had re-aroused a good many of Masterson's scruples—some ten minutes over their allotted half-hour before they had persuaded him to admit, "I don't say I will. And I don't say I won't. I'll think things over. Come and see me again when there's something definite." And exactly twenty minutes before that, Adrian Rose wrote the words "Slow Curtain" under the final typescript of the final act of his very newest play.

Such moments, inevitably, sent Adrian Rose's brain racing.

So—Isobel being out—the playwright, over-thrilled, over-excited, almost beyond himself with to-day's artistic certainty (doomed, one need hardly add, to to-morrow's equally artistic reaction) that this new play was the finest which he, or, indeed, anyone else, had ever written, grabbed for his boots, grabbed for his hat, swore at his secretary for asking him to dictate a business letter, swore at his man-servant for not finding his pet cigar-case—and, having apologized to both of them, dashed savagely out of his flat, savagely past the Savage Club, and savagely up York Street into the Strand.

There—while one part of his mind thought of what a success "Loose Ends" would be when he produced it, of how America would tumble over herself for it, and how the movie-firms would go crazy to acquire the cinema-rights, and how he would deal with the movie-firms, very faithfully, exacting from them every last, least stiver which was his due—the other part of his mind bethought itself of his pal, John.

By the time Adrian reached Carlton House Terrace, however, the first, worst ebullience of his mood had subsided; and accordingly, it did not take him, shot upwards in the lift, to find Adamson and Beneforth waiting for it at the top of the shaft, more than about thirty seconds to determine the object of their visit.

"Sparlington's pretty queer, isn't he?" asked Adrian. "I read something about it. Well, well. There's nothing like being prepared for political eventualities. Has John made any promises?"

"He has—and he hasn't," replied Beneforth. "I wish *you'd* help to persuade him. And if you can persuade him, don't forget that you're one of his main assets. Without you, and that Fellowship of yours, there'll be no certainty of his getting in."

"Right you are," agreed Rose; and, having clashed home the lift-gate on the pair of them, found his way in to John.

John, reached, seemed a trifle pensive. But his solemn face lit when he saw Adrian; and the moment they had shaken hands, he plunged into confidences.

"Rather bad form in a way," he concluded. "Taking Sparlington's death for granted, I mean. That's why I wouldn't commit myself. Still, if Sparlington does happen to die——"

"You'll have another cut for politics."

"Precisely." And Masterson, his scruples at rest and his elation again on him, began to talk Thameside South; continued talking that salubrious locality till Rose interrupted him.

"*I* came," interrupted Rose, "to ask you to lunch with me.

The play's finished, thank goodness. And I'm a free man. What about the Oak Tree? We can talk there. I need a talk, old man. 'Loose Ends'—great title, eh?—has gone clean to my head."

"I'd rather you lunched here," answered Masterson.

"Why?"

"Well, as a matter of fact"—the husbandly smile betrayed a certain self-satisfaction—"I don't lunch out much these days. Irene doesn't seem to like it."

"Really! That's very unmodern of her."

They talked Irene for a few moments; then Masterson, glancing at the clock, said, "By Jove, I must dictate a brace of letters before we go down"; and, taking Rose's permission for granted, summoned Mary Millward.

Rose, absorbed in his work, had rather forgotten his suspicions about Mary Millward. Her appearance, however—she came in very quietly, and acknowledged his greeting without effusion—recalled them to his memory.

"Nothing much wrong with her to-day," thought Rose, watching covertly while her fine hands took down from Masterson's rather hesitant dictation.

For Mary's hands—one holding the notebook, the other poising the pencil—were perfectly steady. Her voice, when it asked the few necessary questions, had regained all its forthrightness. Only her eyes, perhaps—in the rare glimpses Rose had of them when they lifted from the notebook—betrayed something of worry to his hypersensitive imagination.

It pleased Rose, not inconsiderably—because he had always liked Mary Millward—to imagine that she should have come so well through that unknown distress; and after she had gone from them, he said to John: "I suppose you haven't any idea what's been the matter with that secretary of yours? Last time I was here she looked as though she were going to have some kind of a breakdown."

"Breakdown," commented Masterson. "What on earth put that into your head? Miss Millward lost her mother a little while ago. And naturally, it affected her."

"So that was it," thought Rose; while aloud—as they made their way downstairs to lunch—he went on, "Devilish good woman, your Miss Millward. You're lucky to have anyone as capable."

"Yes—I'm rather a lucky fellow all round," agreed Masterson; and all through their meal the thought of his luck kept recurring to his mind.

§ 4

Thanks to Irene, they had a thoroughly jolly meal; nor did even Adrian Rose detect the slightest false note in that jollity.

Everybody at the table—they sat down six, including the Ayrton girls and Euphemia—seemed at the very top of his or her form. He told Irene a little about "Loose Ends"; and she countered by telling him a good deal about the re-commissioned yacht.

"John's had wireless fitted on the yacht," she announced. "And he's had some of the cabins re-decorated. *I* wanted electric light; but apparently it can't be done. The engines aren't big enough—or they're not in the right place. Or else it's the engine-room. I'm bothered if I know. By the way, how do you think John's looking? *I* think he's getting too fat. Phyllis doesn't," this to the elder of the Ayrton girls, "do you, darling? You know you're head-over-heels in love with my John."

"Crazy about him, my dear," said Phyllis Ayrton.

Yes—decidedly a jolly meal: so jolly that it rather bored Adrian when—Irene and the Ayrton girls pleading a dress show, and Euphemia a headache as excuse for leaving them—he found himself re-conducted upstairs with the words, "I'm rather keen on having a few minutes' pow-wow about what we're going to do if there is this election," by John.

"Now what about the Fellowship?" asked John, once they got upstairs and had seated themselves, one with his pipe, the other with his cigar, in the inner sanctum. "We'll need those speakers, you know. Especially if we do have Cobbold against us."

"Of course we shall." Rose, still more or less bored, blew a languid smoke-ring. "There'll be no difficulty about that. Though I must say I've been rather neglecting the Fellowship latterly. Don't even know how many members have brassed up this year's subscription. We might find out, don't you think? Ivor'll be able to tell us."

"Oh, Ivor's away," said Masterson. "I sent him down to Portsmouth on Friday—just to see that everything was ship-shape. Lazy young devil—he ought to have been back this morning. However, he'll be here by five o'clock, according to his wire; and then I'll get him to go through the books."

"But couldn't I go through the books?" suggested Rose. "It wouldn't take *me* half-a-jiffy."

"Oh, all right—Miss Millward shall fetch them."

And John Masterson, pressed the bell-push on his desk.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

§ 1

It is not only on the stage that things happen stagily; yet even a playwright's acute perception of the theatrical in every-day life failed to perceive anything in any way dramatic about those three every-day actions which followed on John Masterson's ringing of his bell.

John Masterson's secretary answered that bell exactly as a thousand other secretaries might have answered it. John Masterson's secretary received her instructions, to find and bring the Fellowship books, exactly as a thousand other secretaries might have received them. John Masterson's secretary went out exactly as a thousand other secretaries might have gone out —leaving never a particle of that most valuable theatrical ingredient, Suspense, behind.

After she had gone, indeed, Rose—not quite his own purposeful self, to-day, and becoming a trifle more interested in John's politics—forgot all about the Fellowship books, until many, many minutes later; when the telephone, shrilling on the pedestal-desk, cut short their conversation. And even then it was the merest impulse—born of his observation that John's telephone-talk to Rupert Starleigh seemed likely to prolong itself—that made him get up and lounge out through the two self-closing baize doors into Mary Millward's office.

These ordinary, every-day happenings, however—or so at least it appeared to Adrian Rose when, a while later, he considered the scene as a whole—merely served to enhance the effect of that picture which flashed itself at him, simultaneously with the soft slams of the two baize doors shutting John's voice into limbo, at the very moment of his exit from the one room, his entrance into the other. For that this picture was of the drama, there could be no doubting. Every detail of it shot tragedy, real life tragedy, at Rose's eyes.

There was only one actress in this tragic picture—and that actress, Mary Millward, sat facing him, barely three feet away,

at a long, roll-top bureau. The desk-rail of the bureau was low enough for him to perceive the most of her figure. A sharp ray of afternoon sunshine, slanting down from a near-by window, shewed him every line on her face. Face and figure—he saw in that sharp light—were both rigid. The blue pupils of Mary's eyes had shrunk to needle-points under the wide-open lids. Her big mouth had compressed itself. Her cheeks were candle-white—two specks of furious scarlet painted like grease-paint on their smooth wax. Before her—on the wooden flat of the bureau—lay two books, open. One of her hands was spread-eagled over one of the books, as though hiding it from him. The other hand held a pencil so tightly that he could see its every knuckle-bone.

"I say," began Rose stupidly, "I say——"

As he spoke, her hand dropped the pencil; and he caught a look of relief.

"I thought you were John," she said with that compressed mouth of hers. "You startled me. I thought you were John." And then, obviously putting every ounce of energy into self-control, "I mean I thought you were Mr. Masterson, Major Rose—and I didn't want Mr. Masterson to see."

"To see what?" Rose still spoke stupidly, though his purposeful self was already beginning to come back.

"This."

She rose as she spoke; and handed him the two books, one fat, the single word "Cash" stamped in gold on its red-leather binding; the other slim, bound in yellow parchment, and made up, only two days since, by the Bank.

"It was just chance that made me compare them," she went on, her eyes, still pin-pointy, glancing beyond him to the closed door. "That—and a little incident I happened to remember. A look *he* gave me—about a month ago—when I disturbed him. You realize, of course, that we must keep this to ourselves, that we mustn't let Mr. Masterson know?"

At any other moment, the woman's anxiety that Masterson should not know, the very fact that she had spoken of him (and twice) as "John" would have let Rose see the truth about her. But Rose, at that particular moment, saw only Ivor's figures. The figures leered at him—leered discrepancy—worse than discrepancy, Crime. No one, possibly, could doubt this crime. The discrepancy was too blatant. Not even the discrepancy of embezzlement—but just a theft—just a plain, commonplace, foolish, *dirty* theft!

"He seems to have just made free with what he wanted," said

Rose at last ; and his voice was bitter between his grating teeth. " My fault, of course. But who'd have dreamed one couldn't trust him with the signature ? How much do you think he's taken in all ? "

" I was checking when you came in. According to the Pass Book he's taken over a thousand. But I'm afraid it's more than that. His last month's balance is a fake. I've already found three false entries in his Cash."

" Which ones ? "

" These."

She took the books from him, picked up her pencil, pointed him out the three false entries. The pointing pencil shook. So did her voice when, after he had verified her discoveries, she repeated—again glancing beyond him at the closed baize of the door :

" We *must* keep this to ourselves. If it's in any way possible, we simply *mustn't* let Mr. Masterson know."

" But how can we do that, Miss Millward ? "

" I don't know how we can, but we must. Think—you're his friend. Think how it'll hurt him if he finds out that his wife's brother is a thief. Think if we can't find some way of putting this money back. If it's too much for you, *I'll* help. I've got a little saved up, and a house of my own, and some furniture."

" Furniture," echoed Rose—and at that instant, looking on this woman, understood all her secret. " She loves him," understood Rose, " loves John ; would do anything—anything in the world—to save him pain. So would I. But we can't put this money back—we can't let him go on trusting Ivor. That's impossible—impossible." And almost before those thoughts finished racing through Rose's mind, John had entered —noiselessly with that noiseless jungle-step of his ; had entered, and was confronting them both.

" Miss Millward, Adrian," said John—for even as deliberate a brain as his had not failed to read some drama into their situation—" what's happened ? Is anything the matter ? "

Mary would have lied to him—but the lie choked in her unhappy throat. Rose, dumbfounded, could find no word that he wished to say. So that, for many, many seconds the three stood silent, John's eyes all for Adrian's, Mary's all for John.

At last, John spoke again. " There *is* something the matter. Won't you tell me, either of you, what it is ? "

Once more, Mary would have lied ; but already Adrian Rose had found words, was telling John the truth.

" Miss Millward doesn't wish you to know," began Adrian

Rose. "Nor do I. It's a rotten thing to have to tell any man about one of his relations. But the thing's gone too far. It's too serious for concealment. We've been going through the Fellowship accounts, John; and the Fellowship accounts have been faked."

"Faked!" Mary Millward never forgot the incredulity, the horror of that one word.

"Yes, John. Faked." And Adrian Rose, without any more ado, told the rest of the story.

Watching John Masterson while he listened to that story, watching him while he, too, scrutinized the books, the woman who loved John Masterson would have sold everything she possessed to give him one word of consolation. Her whole soul ached towards this man—ached with an intolerable agony at the thought that it should have been from her hand that this blow had fallen upon him. His face was a mask, almost expressionless: yet despite the mask, she knew all his suffering. And she—she who understood him as no other—could do nothing to ease that suffering; could only wait, like an automaton, till the tale was done.

The tale was done now—the books back on her bureau, the two men eyeing one another in the dust-moted sunlight.

"It's a disgusting business," said Rose. "Disgusting. I don't care a curse about the actual money. That's my hunt, anyway. But damn it—damn it all, John, how can a chap keep his faith in human nature when he meets with this sort of treachery from his own kind?"

And hearing that word, "treachery"—while John, his face still mask-like, was yet groping for speech—all the agony which had gone before seemed as no agony to Mary Millward's miserable mind. For what was this treachery of Ivor's compared with that other—Irene's? What was this suffering of John's against the possibility of that other suffering—the suffering he might yet have to undergo?

"It would break his heart," thought Mary; and the thought dazed, blinded, deafened her: so that she never heard Masterson's answer to Rose's question; never heard the other door of the office open on them; never saw Ivor Carslake till he was within a foot of her elbow, speaking with John.

"Deuced bad luck, John," Ivor was saying. "Dunster's had an accident—just before I left Portsmouth."

Then Ivor's voice stopped—stopped dead upon a silence that seemed to have no end.

In that silence, Ivor's brown eyes were focussed—almost as

the eyes of a sleepwalker are focussed—upon the books. Why hadn't he locked up those books? *Hadn't* he locked up those books? Yesterday, he could have sworn to it. Yesterday! Had there ever been a yesterday—a day when he might just have saved himself; might have "tidied up" this month's balance, as he had "tidied up" last month's, and the month's before? Dear Christ, what was the use of thinking about yesterday? It was to-day that he must save himself. To-day! Now!

But already, safety had vanished. Already John had spoken to him.

"Adrian and I want a word with you," said John—and signalled, peremptorily, that he should follow them through the baize doors.

§ 2

The baize doors had been closed for a century; but he—Ivor Carslake—was still listening to John. John sat at his desk, one elbow on the ink-stained mahogany, one big hand propping his cleft chin. By him, sat Adrian Rose. And he—Ivor Carslake—shivering where he stood before them, was more afraid, a thousand times more afraid, of the silent Adrian than of the speaking John.

"That's the position, Ivor," concluded John. "Carfax—I have no doubt—will not take long to find out the precise extent of your defalcations. Meanwhile, kindly explain your conduct. If you can."

"What do you want me to explain?" said Ivor—and the voice sulked in his parching mouth. "I haven't denied anything, have I? The money was there, and I took it. It wasn't yours."

"What difference does that make?" Adrian spoke, for the first time.

"But why did you take it, Ivor?"

John again. What a fool! No wonder Irene went gadding to get away from him.

"Because I was hard up, of course."

"And what made you hard up?" Adrian once more: and one could expect no mercy from Adrian. Adrian was a Jew. Adrian had trusted one to sign for the Fellowship. Adrian would have to make good the money one had borrowed from the Fellowship. Curse Adrian. He'd send a man to gaol—just because he'd borrowed a bit of money; just because he couldn't pay back a few rotten quids!

Gaol. The thought set the boy shivering again.

"What made you hard up?" repeated the Jew. "Go on—

we want to hear about it"; and John (the old ass!) added, "You've no right to be hard up. You draw a decent enough screw. Seven hundred a year."

"What's seven hundred a year nowadays?" Ivor's mouth writhed. "I can't live on it. Nobody could."

"Don't talk twaddle." Rose's black eyes seemed like two swords at the boy's throat. "You've been hard up because you've been keeping a woman. You told me so yourself. Less than a fortnight ago."

"I never said anything of the kind. I said I was engaged."

"Engaged," sneered Adrian. "To Milly Reeves!"

"You"—all there was of decency in Ivor snarled at the sneer—"you shan't speak of her like that. She didn't know . . ."

"Didn't know what?"

"Where the money came from!"

"You admit you've been living with her, then?"

"What's that got to do with you?"

"A good deal. Are you living with her?"

"Not in the same flat."

"You've been giving her money, though?"

"Only a little."

"Paying bills for her?"

"I have paid bills for her."

"Jewellery?"

"No. Only one ring."

"How much did you pay for the ring?"

"I—I've forgotten. Not much. About a pony."

"Just a minute, Adrian." John's voice, horribly deliberate, interrupted the purposeful catechism. "You tell us, Ivor, that this woman had no idea you were stealing the money she got from you. Are you prepared to swear to that?"

"Yes. On my dying oath."

"Does anyone else know what you've been doing?"

"Not a soul."

"You'll take your oath on that, too?"

"Yes."

Silence now, with John glancing at Adrian, Adrian glancing at John. And now more questions from Adrian—a rain of questions—each more difficult of answer than the last. How much had he stolen in all? When had he begun stealing? Why had he stolen so much in the last four weeks? "Betting, eh! You bloody young fool. So you thought you could get it back by betting." And now silence again, with John looking straight at him, and Adrian looking for some cue from John.

The looks, the silence, terrified Ivor, drove all thoughts except the thought of self-preservation from his mind. What were these two going to do? God, what *were* they going to do? Send for a policeman—send him to prison? But—damn it—they couldn't send him to prison. He was John's brother-in-law. John couldn't send his wife's brother to prison. But John, really, hadn't got anything to do with it. He was in the hands of Adrian—of Adrian the Jew. Curse the Jew. Curse all Jews. No hope there. This one's face was like a blank wall. One didn't know what was going on behind it. And John's face—wasn't there hope there? There must be. Wouldn't John save him—save him from this filthy Jew?

That was the moment—and both men had been waiting for it—when Ivor's nerve cracked, when he began to plead, as a slave pleads, for mercy.

"Don't send for the police," pleaded Ivor. "John—for God's sake don't let him send for the police. I only meant to borrow the money. I swear I only meant to borrow it. And it's only fifteen hundred. Fifteen hundred's nothing to you. You're so rich. And besides, we're relations. You're my brother-in-law."

"The cowardly young swine," thought Rose; and Masterson, "Irene's brother! And she made me sack Parker for taking his glass of port. How am I going to tell *her?* I daren't tell her. It would hurt her like hell if she were even to guess what he's done."

But neither of them interrupted; and the boy pleaded on.

"Only fifteen hundred. And it wouldn't have been anything like that if it hadn't been for The Animal. If The Animal hadn't fallen, I'd have paid it all back. I give you my word of honour I meant to pay it all back. And I could have easily. I had a monkey on The Animal. A whole bally monkey—and he started at twelve to one. *You* thought The Animal was a cert, didn't you John? You told me so. And Luckett swore he was. And I didn't only back him to win—I had half of it on for a place. I'd have been all right if he'd got a place . . . John, won't you see me through? Just this once. I—I swear to you it'll be a lesson to me, that I'll never do anything like this again."

But John's face, as Rose's, remained dumb, inscrutable; and after a few more sentences the plea petered out in a little pitiable wail. "Not prison," wailed Ivor. "Not prison, John. Please!"

More silence followed—silence that racked Ivor to the bone. Imaginatively, he saw himself already tried, sentenced—and

Milly, reading his sentence, hating him because her name, too, had been dragged in. "Don't let that happen," said his imagination. "Kill yourself, commit suicide first." But he couldn't commit suicide—he wouldn't have a chance—not if Adrian insisted on sending for the police.

The silence had broken. Adrian was whispering something—something very ghastly—to John. He tried to catch what Adrian was whispering; failed; heard John whisper back, "Precisely. Leave him to me."

Then John uncupped his chin from his hand; leaned back in his chair, and spoke—very slowly, very deliberately, almost as Ivor had once heard a judge speak in Court.

"The fact that you're my brother-in-law, Ivor," said John, "only makes things worse for you, not better. A criminal's a criminal; and I for one don't believe in letting criminals off. I may say that if it weren't for Adrian, you couldn't *be* let off. It's Adrian who has decided you shall not be prosecuted. Not I."

"Then I'm not going to be prosecuted?" Hope quivered in the voice.

"No. But only on one condition: that you give both of us your word that you'll hold your tongue. And when I say hold your tongue, I mean it. Nobody's to hear of this. Do you understand? Nobody. And especially"—Rose, listening all ears, caught the tiniest break in Masterson's steady voice—"not my wife, not Irene. You're not to speak to Irene after you leave this room. You're not to see her—until I give you my permission. Meanwhile, you're no longer in my service. I shan't tell your sister that—yet. I shall tell her you're taking a holiday. You'd better take a holiday—go down to your parents. They're not to know I've dismissed you, either. Not until you hear from me. Is that clear? It is. Good. Now answer me one more question. This accident of Dunster's. How serious is it? How long will it take him to get well?"

"I"—answered Ivor, his stammered gratitude cut short by the glare in Adrian's eyes—"I don't know how long it'll take him to get well. He was run over—by one of the Admiralty lorries. No bones broken; but he's badly bruised. When I saw him, he wanted to know whether you'd put off the trip—or take command yourself. I promised I'd wire him about that as soon as I got back. Shall I?"

"No," said Masterson—and his tone was steel. "You'll do nothing more for me, Ivor. Except leave my house. Is *that* clear? It is. Then you can go."

§ 3

Mary Millward did not speak to Ivor Carslake as he went by her on his way out. But in the outer office Lonsdale looked up from his ledgers and wanted to know " what on earth they'd all been doing ? "

" You mind your own —— business," said Ivor, groping for the bag he had brought with him, for his gloves and hat.

And though the missing word is one which, even in this age of universal self-expression, has not yet been licensed for print, there were tears in it, tears of shame.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

§ 1

MARY MILLWARD's understanding of the man she loved had not exaggerated his sufferings.

The discovery of Ivor Carslake's crime—pricking as it did every bubble of his momentary elation—had hurt Masterson more than anything in life before. But worse than the hurt in him, was the rage. All through his catechism of the boy, and all through Adrian's catechism of him, and all through that subsequent hour when, alone and fearful lest some chance word of his should betray the secret to Irene, he decided to make Dunster's accident his excuse and leave for Portsmouth that very night—memory had shewn him the picture of another thief, black and hand-lopped, whining and cringing to him in the Abyssinian dust.

He had been sorry for that black thief. But how could he be sorry for this white one—for Ivor, who had stolen reasonlessly, not to get him sustenance but to satisfy a desire ?

And besides, this Ivor—this weakling who, discovered, cringed like a native for mercy—was his brother-in-law, blood-brother to his young wife, flesh of the same flesh as she, bone of the same bone !

That had been John Masterson's mood when, little more than an hour after Ivor had slunk from Carlton House Terrace, he summoned Menelik to him, told Menelik to pack ; summoned Rogers to him, told Rogers to have the fastest car ready within ten minutes ; summoned Belton to him and told Belton, " I'm leaving Town at once. Give this note to your mistress the moment she comes in."

And this morning—a gray, uncertain morning, with a warm wind ruffling the waves at harbour-mouth—as he came down the gangplank of the *Minotaur* where she lay at anchor off Cameron Nicholson's, his mood was much the same.

Try as he might to make excuses for the boy ; tell himself though he did that Ivor's crime, like many another in the human

calendar, was a crime of weakness ; realize, as he could not help realizing, that a little of Ivor's fault could be laid at the door of his own over-much money (" What's seven hundred a year nowadays—I can't live on it—nobody could ") ; argue it out this way, argue it out that way, argue it out the other—one fact remained : Ivor was Irene's brother, flesh of the same flesh, bone of the same bone.

" But only the same flesh, only the same bone," thought Masterson, stepping into the stern sheets of his gig and ordering both gig and cutter to give way. " Irene couldn't behave like that. Irene couldn't cheat."

The thought of Irene's honesty, of the essential difference between her and her wastrel brother, consoled him a little. But as the gig went lifting on its way, rage gripped him anew. Neither Irene's honesty, nor his love for her, nor his trust in her could affect this issue in Ivor's favour. Rather, did they weigh the scales against him. Because it was Ivor's fault—and only Ivor's —that he, John Masterson, had to keep this shameful secret from his wife.

§ 2

After which, it is perhaps a trifle sardonic to relate that " last night," as viewed through the mind of Irene Masterson, while the Pullman which carried her and her three guests those last few miles through cathedraled Chichester and peaceful Havant and busy Fratton into Portsmouth, contained scarcely a thought, and certainly never a regretful thought, of John.

His brief note explaining his decision not to postpone their trip because of Dunster's accident, but to take command of the *Minotaur* himself and start off at once, " just to see that every-thing's ship-shape for to-morrow and arrange about a pilot," had sent her straight from the hall to her private telephone, straight from the telephone to Coralie, and straight from Coralie's hands to the pleasantest of pleasant *tête-à-tête* dinners with Rupert. And she was considering that dinner now, talking of it even, as she leaned back, graceful in her white yachting flannels, to Cynthia and Tom.

" Pity you weren't at The Embassy last night," she told Cynthia and Tom. " Rupert and I had the time of our young lives ; didn't get home till Heaven and the milkman know what hour this morning."

Cynthia, who never relished catching an early train, made no comment on this remark ; and Cynthia's Tom—a large, meek,

affable, moon-faced person whose one advantage as a husband was his superb blindness to his wife's peccadilloes—had apparently not heard it. So Irene returned to thought; while Rupert Starleigh, watching her sideways from under the stiff peak of a brand-new yachting-cap, wondered, for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time since leaving Waterloo, whether it weren't a trifle risky to have come on this particular trip.

For last night—and for the first time since the re-commencement of their intimacy—Rupert Starleigh had been conscious of reaction; of the definite mental question, "How long can this affair go on?" And this morning, despite all the charm and all the sex-attraction of Irene, that question was still nagging him. Because, of course, this affair—like all other affairs—couldn't go on indefinitely. One day either he would tire of her, or she of him. Then they would part, and he, Rupert Starleigh—there were no letters, thank the Lord—would be safe. But meanwhile—and all the time—he was in danger.

"After all," he thought, shifting his glance from Irene's face to the face of the purblind Tom, "John isn't quite the sort of fool Tom is. And Irene—though she does think herself so clever—hasn't half Cynthia's talent for intrigue."

Rupert Starleigh had never been over-keen on Cynthia Trevor; but to-day—his glance shifting again—he could not help appreciating the fact that Cynthia, with all her faults, had always displayed a certain wisdom, a certain reticence about her infidelities. She was like a cat, was Cynthia—like a very large, very tame, very secretive, very lascivious female cat. And though Irene, too, was cat-like (fondle her or forbear to fondle—and either way she could scratch like the very devil at the unsophisticated hand), she, unlike Cynthia, possessed a wild-cat quality, a quality of courage, very disturbing to Rupert Starleigh's peace of mind.

"The Lord knows what *she'd* do if ever we got in a tight place," he decided, as the train, Portsmouth Town behind it, jerked the last mile to its destination, and Tom, stuttering while he gathered up his Cynthia's newspapers, made himself a general nuisance to the three. "Play old Harry with things, I expect. Tell John the whole truth—and then tell him to go to hell."

And Rupert Starleigh, as it so happened, was still considering the personal consequences of such a truth-telling when Tom Trevor, having poked his moon-face through the open window of their halted Pullman, turned back saying, "There he is. B-by the b-bookstall. I'll g-go and fetch him. I'll g-go and fetch John."

§ 3

Though something of its normal calm had returned to our friend John Masterson's mind during his half-hour of waiting for the train, he felt quite abnormally nervous when, having shaken the moon-faced Tom by the hand, he found himself confronted by the bright eyes of his wife. Supposing Ivor had broken faith again, given his sister some hint? They were so very intelligent, those eyes. The merest hint would be enough.

But Irene, obviously, knew nothing. "Poor darling," she said, "fancy your having to dash away like that! Did you find the pilot all right? And why did you bring Menelik? You didn't last time. I thought one of the stewards always looked after you."

Her reference to "last time" pleased him no less than her obvious ignorance about Ivor.

"We're a steward short, as well as a captain," he answered; and went on, "Hope you had a comfortable journey down, Cynthia. How are you, Rupert? Menelik's going to do for you as well as for me. You'll find his English a bit quaint, but he's a pretty fair batman."

"Oh, I'll be all right," said Rupert, his misgivings still strong.

By this time, two sailors had collected the hand-baggage from the Pullman and were carrying it off the station on to the quay.

"You'd better follow them, dear," continued Masterson to Irene. "I'll get hold of Coralie and see about the trunks."

Masterson's glance followed his wife as she left the station; and after he had retrieved Coralie from her third-class carriage, and given her over to two more of his sailors with instructions that she and the cabin-trunks were to be taken off in the cutter, nervousness fell on him again. Irene mustn't find out about Ivor! Such things, nasty things, were not for her. Despite all the budding womanhood, she was still half the child—fit for the holidays of life, but never for its miseries.

"I don't know how I'm going to go on keeping this particular misery from her," he mused, making his slow way across the crowded cobbles to the quay. "She's bound to ask questions when she finds out the boy's left us. But because I love her, I'll have to lie my best."

¶ For to-day—whether on account of this misery from which love bade him shield her, or because of certain honeymoon-memories which had been with him all last evening on board

the *Minotaur*—it seemed to Masterson that he could never sufficiently adore, never sufficiently revere, this young wife of his who stood, one hand at her hip, to watch his sailors stow their baggage aboard the little white gig which lay moored to the iron steps. To-day everything about her—her youth, her grace, her beauty, even the little trick she had of fluttering her eye-lashes—seemed newly wonderful; wonderful as his honeymoon-memories, wonderful as all those other memories of her which ten months of marriage had stored up, like precious honey, in the secret recesses of his brain.

"Mine!" he thought, his blue eyes fondling her. "All that youth—all that grace, all that wit and all that beauty. Mine! Mine!"

Irene did not see those blue eyes fondling; yet in her, too—at the moment—honeymoon-memories were a-stir.

Here, at Portsmouth, ten months had altered never a detail. The topmasts of Nelson's *Victory*, still under repair in the inner basin; the giant crane; the clock above the red-walled Admiralty Dockyard; the huge gray fortress of a warship anchored alongside; the Gosport Ferry waiting for its passengers; the crowded water, with here a destroyer steaming slowly in, and there a motor-launch fussing swiftly out, and there yachts, and there tugs, and there row-boats moored, like their own, to the rusty rings in the weed-lipped granite—all these might have composed the identical picture which John had shewn her on that June morning when they had motored here from Mastersleigh. And the *Minotaur* still held her same place in that picture; still lay—black-hulled and white cabined, the Blue Peter and the Royal Yacht Squadron pennant hoisted, smoke blowing from the little yellow funnel between her mizzen and her main—at the old berth, straight across the harbour-water, exactly opposite to where they were now standing.

Their baggage stowed, a sailor reached up a tattooed hand to help her into the gig; and taking that hand, stepping down into the boat, there came to Irene, very clearly, the recollection of some words John had said to her when she first set eyes upon that old-fashioned two-hundred-and-fifty ton auxiliary steam-yacht which had been his father's before him.

"She's getting rather long in the tooth, dear," John had said. "And you may find her a bit uncomfortable. But she's a seaworthy craft; and I learned all I know about ships aboard her. Yachting's always been one of my hobbies. It's a good game, one of the best in the world. I'd like you—if you can—to love it as much as I do."

A simple man, this John of hers. How pleased he had been with her answer, "Of course I'll love it, dear—just for your sake."

A moment or so later, he had taken his place at the tiller; and as he did so, as their oarsmen gave way and the loaded gig put off across the harbour, yet another memory haunted Irene's mind. Ten months ago, this boat had been more lightly loaded. It had lifted on its way then—and her heart with it. She had been so happy then; so certain that she had done with the half-lover Rupert; so certain-sure that to sail its seas with only John for husband was all that she need ask of life. Whereas now, now . . .

With a wrench, Irene tore her thoughts from the past; but when, after ten minutes of the sea-stroke, John's sailors shipped oars, and she trod the gangplank again, and saw, waiting to welcome her by the door of the saloon, the gray-bearded face of Kennedy ("Mr. Kennedy's our sailing-master, dear. He was with my father for the best part of forty years"), the past gripped her once more: so that she could hardly forgive herself for having invited Rupert, hardly bear the voice of Rupert, hardly quell the thought, "Why haven't I been 'good'?"

And all the short while she watched the gig come up on her davits, and the cutter come alongside, and their cabin-trunks being man-handled aboard, that particular thought kept reiterating itself in Irene's brain. To-day, as on that other honeymoon day, John, once on deck, seemed to lose all his clumsiness. Here—as never in London—he seemed at home; and here—as never in London—his voice lost its hesitancy, became the voice of authority, of the "cave-man" she had first imagined him when their eyes met in Piccadilly.

For nothing of that nervousness which had assailed him on the station shewed in Masterson's orders to his engineer; to Milford, the young blue-eyed First Officer who was doing duty for Dunster; to their pilot, a wizened old man who shook the ragged fringe of rusty hair under his chin a little anxiously at the state of the weather; to Menelik who came fussing about Rupert's suitcase, or to Coralie, when that sallow, secretive Swiss girl eventually followed the cabin-trunks aboard.

Those orders were definite, clear-cut, in no wise to be disobeyed; and listening to them, Irene experienced—for the very first time in their married life—something of trepidation, something of fear. What would this martinet of a husband say to her, what would he do to her—if he knew?

The gangplank up and the cutter on her davits, she had to

accompany him through the newly-decorated saloon and down the narrow curtained passage-way to inspect the four newly-decorated deck cabins.

"Not a bad job," he said, shewing her the cabins one by one. "I've put Cynthia in here—it's usually a bit quieter starboard. Tom's next door; and Rupert's in mine, next to you. I'm going to bunk forward in Dunster's. It's much better if one's skippering one's own show. I think I'll go forward now, if you don't mind. They'll be getting up the anchor in a minute."

He went forward; and watching him go, the faintest of faint smiles hovered about Irene's lips. How could one be afraid of this husband; of this dear, big, stupid, unsuspicious husband who had actually given up his own cabin to Rupert!

"John'll never know," she thought, re-inspecting her new brass swing-bed, her new oak-sheathed wash-stand, her new swivel chair, her new red carpet and the new chintz curtains over the square porthole. "Never." Yet even so—perhaps because of John's very unsuspicion—she could not restrain one more prick of conscience.

Presently, a steward brought her cabin-trunk; and presently Coralie, full of disquiet at the thought of *mal-de mer*, came hurrying to unpack. "*Si ça ne dérange pas, Madame*," said Coralie.

"No. You'd better get it over before you're sea-sick," answered Irene; and went back on deck.

Tom, Cynthia and Rupert were standing aft by the wheel; John forward, near the bridge house at the foot of the foremast. She hesitated a second, then joined John; who, seeing her approach, smiled a slow, pleasant smile that set conscience pricking anew.

"You damn fool," she said to herself; and to him, "I thought you were busy—getting her out."

"Getting her out's not my pigeon," he answered. "The pilot's in command till we're past the Needles. I'm only a passenger at the moment. Shall we go top-sides, like we did last year?"

"Yes." His reference to last year pleased her, as hers had pleased him. "Yes. I'd like that."

He led her "top-sides"—up the rope ladder to the bridge-deck; stood there with her, as he had stood on that other day, silent, his rapt eyes roaming his ship. And again, the past repeated itself, mingled with the present in her mind.

Only the things of the land altered; not the things of the sea. Again, she heard the anchor come up with the last rattle of its chain over the forward windlass. Again, she heard the

phut of the donkey-engine, the voice of the boatswain shouting, "Shut her off, Bill," to the A.B. in charge. Again, the phutting of the donkey-engine ceased; and a bell rang for quarter-speed below. Again, the planks under her thin-shod feet gave their first scarcely perceptible throb, and Cameron Nicholson's big wharf buildings alongside slid a foot, two feet, three feet against the gray of the sky.

Watching that sky, John said, just as he had said ten months ago, "Not a bad wind. We ought to be able to hoist sail once we're past the Needles." And this time, listening to John, she thought of Rupert. Yet something of the old passion, of the old romance, held her still; held her here at John's side, silent, silent as he . . .

The wharf buildings were sliding faster now; and looking ahead along the *Minotaur's* fifty-foot jib-boom, she could see the narrow harbour opening before her. Above them, Blue Peter had just dipped. Behind them, just visible under their new wireless aerial through the tangle of the main-mast rigging and the funnel smoke, the hands of the high Dockyard clock pointed twenty-five minutes past twelve. It had been twenty-five minutes past twelve last time; and even as last time, "one bell" struck from their own brass as the *Minotaur* crawled out by Round Fort, and the narrow spire of Ryde Church shot up beyond Spitbank and Horse Sand.

Beyond harbour-mouth, the same ripples met them—baby chops of sea that slapped at their crawling forefoot. And soon she heard the pilot ring for half-speed ahead; heard the first distinct thresh of their screw. Last year, she had thrilled to the first screw-thresh, But to-day, she could not thrill. Life was so cruel—it never gave one back the old thrills. Why was life so cruel. Why? Why?

In that moment, she wanted the others; wanted Cynthia, Rupert, Tom; wanted their chatter to take away this silly mood. But the others were still aft—Tom pointing overside, Cynthia's blue hat following his point, Rupert a little aloof from them, the peak of his yachting-cap a-glitter where he lounged by the rails So the silly mood endured—and her silence with it.

The *Minotaur* steamed on—slowly, steadily. The circular concrete of Round Tower and Spitbank Fort sank into the water astern. Two leagues ahead, on their port bow, Osborne Towers just peeped above the woods.

"Cruel!" she thought. "Cruel! Can't one have both thrills, both romances—the old and the new?"

Soon, their pilot rang for three-quarter speed; and now all

the panorama of Portsdown Forts and Spithead and Southampton Water re-spread itself—blue and green and corn-colour under the clearing skies—for her delight. Only to-day, it was half delight. She tried to rejoice, as she had rejoiced ten months ago, at the first clean wind of the open sea; at the whistle of it through their cordage, at the tang of it in her nostrils and the baff of it against her eyelids when she looked ahead. But the wind would have none of her rejoicing. The very song of it was a song of reproach.

"You want to hark back," sang the wind. "But you can't hark back. You're you. Life's life. And besides, what's the use of pretending—of imagining you were happy when you were being faithful to John?"

"But I like pretending," she told the wind; "and to-day I really don't know which I like the better, Rupert or John."

Ryde was dwindling now and Cowes ahead. She saw the Medina open between its woods; saw the little white houses clustering to water's edge, the Green, the Castle, Egypt Point.

"Better than last time," John remarked, as they rounded Egypt Point and steamed through the Roads into the Solent. "The view, I mean. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, dear," she heard herself answer. "Oh, yes—much better." But the wind went on with its singing, "Don't be so silly. You're pretending—pretending. And what's the use of pretending—when you can't hark back?"

The wind had risen, and the gray of the sky turned to pearl-colour. Sailing yachts were scudding in the Solent—red wings and white wings—scudding for her delight. A motor-boat, the sea-plume high at her decked bows, tore by them, swung in a half-mile circle, tore back towards the shore. Starboard, hiding the sandy beaches, a great four-funelled liner went promenading for Cherbourg and New York.

And now—just for a magic while—the wind ceased its singing, and she knew full delight: so that when he asked, suddenly prosaic, "I say—what about lunch?" she answered him, as she had answered him ten months ago, "Not yet, John. Oh please, John, not yet."

"But what about the others?" he went on, still prosaic. "They'll be starving."

"No, they won't be. And even if they are, they must wait."

So he let the others wait; and Irene stood on—stood on for a full half-hour, beauty mazing her, lost in pretences, lost in a year-old dream.

Gradually the Solent lengthened astern. Gradually they

raised Yarmouth Pier; and, as the channel narrowed, the white lighthouse beyond Yarmouth Pier and the shingle-spit of Hurst Castle; and as the channel opened again, wooded Totland and the cliffs of Alum Bay.

The wraith of a sunbeam touched those cliffs as the *Minotaur* rounded Headon Point; lit them till they glittered like a woman's shawl with deep purples and cinnabar-reds and orange-yellows and the blue of a dull steel blade. And now, beyond them, up out of the foam at cliff-foot, rose the great gray rocks of the Needles, guarded by that squat light-tower which is herald of the open sea.

There, they dropped their pilot into his waiting launch; and there—for though the year-old dream held, the wind was again at its reproaches—Irene at last consented to lunch.

Fiddles were on the table when they got to lunch; but under the lee of the Island, the sea still kept smooth enough. Cynthia grumbled a little at the long wait; Tom was hungry; Rupert—apparently—had the sulks.

"Let him sulk," thought Irene, remembering, still in her dream, the old saloon with its light pine panelling and its cracked harmonium and its four swivel-chairs and its stiff-backed leather sofa which had represented the height of luxury when John's mother cracked the christening bottle of Clicquot over the *Minotaur's* bow. How little of that old saloon remained! Only the brass oil-lamps had watched that other meal—that ten months old honeymoon-meal—alone with John. Everything else—figured oak-panels, clamped table, chintz-covered sofa, shining piano—was new. "And I ought to have insisted on new lamps," decided Irene, the dream dwindling a little from her mental sight.

Lunch over, Rupert, though no longer sulky, demanded a deck-chair and a book; while Tom, who had developed an insatiable curiosity about the *M-Minotaur* ("How much c-coal does she c-carry, John? What's her exact t-tonnage?") went off to examine the engine-room and the wireless-cabin. Cynthia, according to expectation, decided she'd better lie down.

"I think I'll lie down, too," said Irene; but the relic of the dream changed her mind for her; and she went forward again with John.

The sea had grown livelier while they were in the saloon; and, when they reached the knighthead, little whitecaps were breaking all across the wide expanse between sinking Dorset and their starboard bow. There, at the knighthead, they

found Milford, who asked, saluting, " Shall we bank fires, sir ? " and told, " Please, Mr. Milford. I'm just going to set sail," ran off, saluting again, to warn Kennedy.

" Shouldn't set jib-topsails if I was you, sir," said Kennedy, on hand a moment or so later. " Wind's rising a bit. We'll only have to take 'em in later."

" All right, Mr. Kennedy. Have it your own way. The glass in the saloon is well over twenty-nine. So we'll make straight for the Scillies—and not put in to Torquay."

" Aye, aye, sir." And Kennedy, cupping his hands to his mouth, began to bawl the old orders, while Irene, still at John's side, watched his sailors pour up from the forecastle ; watched them hauling at rope and bowline ; watched the tackle tighten on the blocks, and the square-rigged topsails take the wind at her fore, and the mainsail belly from the main-mast yard, and the stud-sails fly, and the jibs and the mizzen trysail ; watched the booms swing over and the wheel with the booms ; watched all that miracle of wreathing a tall ship with her canvas which no landsman, however cunningly he write about it, ever truly understands.

And, " Oh, John," said Irene, when all that miracle was accomplished and the *Minotaur* walking her good ten knots down the rising wind, " Oh, John, don't you wish we were on our honeymoon again ? It was such a wonderful honeymoon, ours."

§ 4

" Oh, John, don't you wish we were on our honeymoon again ? It was such a wonderful honeymoon, ours."

All that afternoon, louder than the noise of the wind in his cordage, louder than the hissing of the whitecaps overside, those words—spoken half in earnest, spoken half in jest, spoken all in wistfulness, spoken who shall say ?—echoed and re-echoed in every chamber of John Masterson's mind.

Thinking of them, he hardly remembered the trouble about Ivor. What did it matter about Ivor ? What did anything matter, except his love for this young wife of his—for this Irene of the short blown hair, and the lithe grace and the easy smile and those glorious eyes whose colour was very colour of the eternal sea ? How he adored her ! How grateful he was for her—for this womanhood he had brought to budding—for this child-woman who might one day be mother of his children—of those children who should love, as they both loved, all the gallant things, fine ships and swift horses, and the wind-race and the

tide-race, and the splendour of the sea-ways, and the splendour of their land.

For all that afternoon his child-woman stayed with Masterson; and all that afternoon, fascinated by the sea-witchery of her, he sailed his *Minotaur*: sailed her towards the sunset, sailed her into the West. And all that afternoon, he had never a doubt of either of them—never a doubt of child-woman, never a doubt of ship.

"Mine," he thought, sailing into the sunset. "Both mine. And I thank the gods for them—thank the high gods who have given me all that makes life worth the living: a woman to love, and high purposes, and good comrades, and the splendour of the sea."

And even after Irene left him because one of those good comrades, Rupert, came calling her to tea, that mood of thankfulness was still on Masterson: so that when the pearl-gray clouds parted and he stood capless, the wind whipping at his hair, to watch from beneath the sheets of the fore-topmost-stay-sail—while the jib-boom sang to him and the waves sang with it, and away, leagues away to starboard, the blue coast-line dwindled, dwindled and dwindled as they headed West by South—it seemed to him as though the very sun, newly bursting from behind his cloud-screen, must be omen of more happiness, of a future so radiant that it dazzled one to foresee.

§ 5

Nor, try though he did to tell himself that he had no wish to stand in a dead man's shoes, did that future seem any the less radiant to John Masterson when, a little later, while he sat alone poring over the charts in Dunster's cabin, knuckles tapped on the door; and he read, scribbled on the message-form his wireless operator handed to him, "Paul Sparlington died this morning. Adamson Beneforth anxious for decision. Central Office also inquiring. Please instruct. Urgent. Millward."

For if, as some philosophers would have it, all man's pleasure be illusion, be certain that this man, writing his answer to Mary's message, had all that pleasure his.

CHAPTER FORTY

§ 1

THE saloon clock pointed to half-past five, and three bells were striking, when Irene Masterson left her guests, and came back on deck. Over tea, the four of them—Rupert merry again, Cynthia rested, and Tom full of newly acquired knowledge about auxiliary steam-yachts—had been their usual selves. Her silly mood had vanished. Conscience no longer troubled her; nor—though still vaguely aware of her dream—did she any more remember the reproachful song of the morning's wind.

The wind had risen a little while they were at their tea. There was a mite more drive in it; a mite more dance in the waves. As she stood by the cutter-davits, a spatter of foam broke inboard; wetted the hem of her skirt. Laughing, she made her way forward; sheltered herself against the bulwarks; looked aft along the ship.

Dun clouds veiled the sunset; and all about the ship there brooded a curious twilight. No land, no light-house, no other ship was to be seen. On the bridge-deck, a boy—his shadow hunch-backed against the steady sails—had already illuminated the green lamp to starboard; was now stooping over the red lamp to port. In the bridge-house cabin, more lamps were burning. Through the big oblong window, she could just see the top of John's head, bending over the chart-table. Impulsively, she moved away from the sheltering bulwarks, and went in to John.

John looked up as she entered; smiled; left the chart-table; shewed her his wireless message. "What do you think of that?" asked John; and added, while she was still reading, "With any luck, I ought to get in this time. Though Percy Cobbold'll take a bit of beating."

"Percy Cobbold?" said Irene stupidly.

He started telling her about Percy Cobbold; and listening to him, she re-experienced—all in a flash—that other election. How she had resented that other election—his enforced absences, his self-absorption, the thought that he preferred his politics to her! And now it didn't seem to matter. She had done with all that sentimentality. She was a woman this time—not just an over-

loving child. And as a woman she knew—though he himself might not know it—that with a man of John's stamp his work would always come before his wife. "That's why I can't be faithful to him," she argued with herself. "Because I'm not at his toptable. Because I've got to be at some man's toptable. Always. All the time."

He kept her with him, talking politics, for nearly twenty minutes; and throughout those twenty minutes—answering him as he wanted to be answered, smiling at him, hoping aloud for his success—she marvelled at the clarity of her own mind.

"You like men," said her mind. "He likes one woman—you. But the half of you—less than the half of you—satisfies him. So you've got a lover. And you always will have a lover. You're that type—not the wife-type at all."

The discovery that she was not the wife-type proved the teeniest bit depressing. Yet it flattered her vanity. And by the time she left John, all the false romantic in her was uppermost. "I'm like Cleopatra," she thought. "Or one of those splendid sinners in Swinburne."

Six bells were striking by then; and more whitecaps breaking inboard. The dun clouds had thickened across the sunset, the twilight thickened about the ship. A wind-gust slammed the port door behind her as she re-entered the saloon.

Menelik had lit the big oil-lamp in the saloon; had cleared away tea; was laying for dinner. On the sofa, watching the Abyssinian at his work, sat Rupert and Tom.

"Cynthia's feeling g-groggy," said Tom. "She's not c-coming in to dinner. Where's the s-skipper?"

"In his cabin," answered Irene; and ordered Menelik to bring cocktails.

Two cocktails made her more than ever the romantic; and after Tom had gone to play steward to his Cynthia, she went over to Rupert; seated herself beside him on the sofa.

"Play me something," she said, her hand fondling Rupert's; and when he refused, "Then kiss me. You haven't kissed me all day."

"A lot of chances I've had, haven't I?" retorted Rupert, drawing away his hand.

"You've got a chance now."

"Don't be a lunatic. I might as well kiss you in Piccadilly as here."

"Funk-stick. I'm not afraid."

"Well—I am."

As Rupert spoke, Menelik slipped in; set more glasses on the

table; glanced at them, and slipped out again, very quietly through the starboard door towards the galley.

"What did I tell you?" commented Rupert. "That damned nigger! We'll have to be devilish careful as long as he's anywhere in the vicinity. Hallo! There's the first bell. I'm off to dress."

He went off to dress; and after a minute or so Irene followed him through the narrow passage-way towards her own cabin. "I suppose he's right," thought Irene. "But this being careful makes me furious."

Coralie, who had succumbed before tea, was not in her cabin; but Irene's evening shoes were under the swivel chair, her stockings and underclothes on it, her newest red frock, smoothed and free of its sleeve-tissues, on the black silk eiderdown of the new bed. Still furious, she took off her white flannels. Stooping to unbuckle her wet shoes, she heard, through the chintz-curtained window which looked aft towards the wheel, feet moving about the decks, the boatswain's whistle, the bellowing of orders. Through the thin wall, Rupert's voice called to her, "I say, we're furling sail."

She did not answer Rupert; but went on with her toilet.

The feet continued to move about the decks; and once she heard John's voice, calling for Kennedy. The cabin-floor tilted a little while she was drawing on her stockings; and the water lipped over the edge of the glass as she jetted in her tooth-wash. After she had pulled her frock over her head, curiosity made her draw back the window-curtain. Rupert had been quite right. She could see men's heads round the mizzen-step, men's legs swarming up the after-shrouds, ropes slacking, canvas flapping down.

Her dressing finished, she opened the wardrobe, took out a white cloak, put it over her red frock, and went along to see Cynthia.

"Leave me alone," whispered the recumbent Cynthia. "Why didn't John put in to Torquay? I'm feeling as sick as a cat."

She closed the door on Cynthia; found the saloon empty; and went on deck. The wind—to port—was still rising. Peering aft over the starboard-rails, she could see sizeish waves racing the ship. Aloft—silhouetted high against the last of the twilight—sailors were busy on some mysterious work. John was not in his cabin; but on the fore-deck she found Mr. Kennedy, and asked him what was being done.

Kennedy explained that they were housing top-masts.

"Taking them down, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Lowering them, madam."

"But why?"

"Owner's orders, madam."

She wanted to ask more; but the sailing-master seemed busy. He turned from her, and began bawling incomprehensible orders aloft. The wireless operator—anxious about his aerial—came out of his door, joined the sailing-master. And more incomprehensible orders followed.

Looking aloft, she realized that a good half of their canvas had been taken in since she left John's cabin. Milford, whom she encountered on her way back to the saloon, tried to explain that they were now only under main and mizzen trysail, foresail, forestaysail and standing-jib. These technicalities baffled her; but the little knowledge of the "good game" which John had imparted on their last trip let her understand that the foresail and forestaysail had been "double reefed." Their gig and cutter—she could see—had been swung inboard, dropped from their davits, and secured to the deck. Meanwhile, the *Minotaur* had lost no way. If anything, she seemed to be sailing faster, heeling as she ran before the wind.

"Why all these precautions, Mr. Milford?" asked Irene; and Mr. Milford, as Mr. Kennedy, answered, "Owner's orders, madam."

She returned to the saloon and sat down on the sofa. The floor of the saloon was tilting a good ten degrees. On the clamped table, glasses and bottles leaned hard against the round wooden racks of the fiddles. The pendant of the big centre oil-lamp no longer hung quite vertical from the new *carte-en pierre* ceiling. The two Cricklites on the piano—recently lit—had already smoked one lip of their crystals.

Presently Tom arrived; and presently Rupert. Rupert's face was a trifle sallow, but his voice gay.

"We're going to bump a bit before morning," said Rupert, lounging over to the big aneroid above the hot-water radiator. And, "Never could understand these damn things," he went on, as Tom joined him there.

"She's d-dropping," pronounced Tom. "She's d-dropped forty-two p-points since we left P-Portsmouth."

John appeared while the two men were examining the aneroid. John still wore his blue reefer jacket, his soft collar, his black tie. "I'm sorry I didn't have time to dress," he said, hanging up his cap. "But I've had rather a lot to do."

The appearance of dinner prevented her asking anything about the state of the barometer, or about the precautions she had observed on deck. His reticence—as always—irritated her; and this, coupled with her irritation against Rupert, made her say, while the four of them were juggling with their soup-plates,

"I suppose you're wishing we'd got Captain Dunster on board, John. I know I am. I'd feel safer then."

Her ill-temper passed Masterson by. He answered her, smiling, "Oh—you're safe enough—even with me for skipper." Nevertheless, watching him carefully, she could see that his mind was not altogether at ease. Half-way through the meal, he excused himself and left the table.

"L-looks as though we were in for a b-bad night," stuttered Tom; and, a moment or so later, the sound of the wooden shutters being bolted home across the saloon portholes confirmed the dictum.

"She'll be apt to ship a bit of water if the wind veers," explained the returning John.

John explained nothing more—though she asked him to; and his reticence continued to irritate: so that her nerves, by the time Menelik brought coffee, were not at their steadiest. She felt strangely excitable—not afraid, but just "jumpy." Since tea-time, everything seemed to have gone wrong. But a brandy steadied her. Nothing had gone wrong really. And if it had, the fault was Rupert's. Rupert should have kissed her when she asked him to. How dared he not kiss her! As though anybody would have seen!

His coffee drunk, John swallowed a hasty glass of port and departed again. Ten minutes later Tom, worried about his Cynthia, did likewise, leaving them alone. Alone with him, her eyes widened at Rupert's; but she did not speak. It was for him to speak, to apologize. Why didn't Rupert speak? Ah, Menelik . . .

Menelik had come in again, gone out again. "I believe he's watching us," said Rupert.

"Watching us. What nonsense."

Her eyes widened once more; her right hand crept across the table-cloth. He wanted to resist her widening eyes, her creeping hand. She was mad, this Irene—dangerous. Yet attractive—God, how attractive. He had been fighting against her attraction all day, wishing himself off this ship. But now—now his blood was throbbing for her.

Then her hand touched him; and in a flash he was on his feet, kissing her—raining kisses on her forehead, behind her ears, on her upturned lips.

And Irene liked those particular kisses—with the *Minotaur* rolling as only sailing-ships do roll, and the empty glasses ticking against the fiddles, and the lamps swaying their embraced shadows grotesquely all about the figured panels of the saloon—better than she had ever liked man's kisses before.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

§ 1

THE clock pointed to half-past nine and three bells were again striking when Tom Trevor came back to the saloon. Rupert—his book on the cleared table—was trying to read. Irene stood by the aneroid, her foot tapping at the floor.

"How's Cynthie?" she asked, turning to him as he entered.

"B-better."

"Do you think she'd mind if I played the piano?"

"N-no. I'm sure she wouldn't."

The new piano—it seemed to Tom Trevor—must be a little out of tune. Some of Irene's opening notes jangled. But then Tom Trevor knew nothing of the jangle in Irene's nerves. Why was Rupert such a coward? What on earth made him imagine that Menelik had seen their last kiss? Menelik hadn't seen that kiss. Rupert had just made Menelik his excuse. His excuse for not coming to her cabin! How dare Rupert refuse to come to her cabin? There couldn't be any danger. Not after midnight. Not once John had gone to his.

Playing—jazz-times and rag-times, a bar or two of Puccini, a bar or two of Schubert, any silly fragment of harmony that came into her head—all these thoughts jangled to one infuriating certainty in Irene's overwrought mind. She hated Rupert. Yes—she hated him. Rupert had no right—no man had any right—to be that kind of a lover. The kind of lover who . . . who kissed and ran away. And to . . . to run away after such kisses—kisses that set one's every vein throbbing, that made one want, want . . .

And he—he knew what one wanted of him—knew and wouldn't. Either wouldn't—or didn't dare. Call that a lover!

So Irene—never looking at her lover—played on; and forward of the saloon, John Masterson, watching his men furl and stow foresail and forestaysail, listened to the wind-blown music. The wind-blown music made him dream, as men of the wider spaces dream; roused all the poetry in him. But hand-in-hand

with his dreams went actuality; and hand-in-hand with poetry, the craft of the sea. For the glass still fell; and love told him to take no risk. That was why he had ordered in more canvas —put her under main and mizzen-trysails and the one double-reefed standing-jib; secured all deck-openings except the port door of the saloon.

Foresail and forestaysail in their gaskets, he went to his cabin; worked out his approximate position; and summoned Mr. Kennedy.

"What do you make of things, Mr. Kennedy? *I* don't like the glass any better than I did."

"It's only the in-shore rain, sir. They'll have been having more showers along the coast."

"Let's hope you're right."

Kennedy's words, all along, had been comforting; but the sea-wisdom in Masterson still found them difficult to believe. He told the old man so, and suggested that he take the wheel at eight bells. The old man said, "Aye, aye, sir, if that's the way you feel about it"; and left him to his thoughts. Thoughtful, he went aft, to speak with his steersman. By the steersman, peering at the needle of the patent log where it spun under the binnacle lamp, stood Milford. He asked Milford what they were making.

"Ten knots, sir," answered Milford. "But the wind seems to be falling."

The wind *was* falling; and Milford even more sure than Kennedy that the drop in the barometer had been caused by the in-shore rain.

"Let's hope you're right, Mr. Milford," repeated Masterson; and made for the saloon.

In the saloon—missing an occasional note whenever some exaggerated roll of the ship threatened to remove her from the piano-stool—Irene continued to play. But the playing ceased when she saw him; and when he asked her to go on, she refused.

"I've got a bit of a headache," she protested. "I think I'll go to bed."

"Come outside for a minute first. It'll do your head good."

"Will it?"

"Rather."

Irene hesitated a second; then rose from the stool. Masterson did not observe the glance she flung at Rupert Starleigh—the glance which said, more clearly than any words, "You see. I'm not dependent on you. There's always my husband. There's always John."

But Rupert Starleigh observed that glance; interpreted it; hated it; hated himself because—knowing her as he did—he could not free himself from her attraction. Deliberately, she made him help her on with her cloak; and as his hands touched her shoulders, the *Minotaur* pitched, throwing her almost into his arms. The contact perturbed him; but left her cold. Recovering herself, she laughed, "Rupert's a dangerous man, John. You oughtn't to trust me with him." Dangerous! Didn't this fool of an Irene understand that they were on a very razor-edge of danger; that Menelik—the uncanny devil—suspected them; perhaps did more than suspect them, *knew?*

"What about our turning in?" said Rupert Starleigh to his pal, Tom Trevor. "What about our saying good-night?"

Irene flung her lover another glance as he offered his hand, a third as she followed John on deck. "I've done with him," she thought. "After that, I've done with him for good."

On deck, the pitching seemed more noticeable. Twice, as she and John made their way forward through the darkness and the drive of the wind, she was forced to slip her arm through his. And this contact did perturb her; set her veins throbbing again. Why shouldn't she teach Rupert a last lesson? If Rupert didn't want her—there was always John.

"How's the head?" asked John.

"Ever so much better, darling."

"I'm glad."

"Are you, darling?" And for the third time, her arm slipped itself through his.

The darkness about the ship lifted a little when they reached the knighthead; and standing there—no longer arm-in-arm—they had a glimpse of the moon. The moon rode just at the peak of their one double-reefed standing-jib. Across her yellow disc, drove the jagged clouds; and by the sudden light of her—while the whitecaps hissed under the *Minotaur's* counter and the foredeck under their feet lifted as the forehand of a horse lifts before the leaping—John Masterson saw his wife's face.

His wife's face was as the moon's face, beautiful beyond all belief. Her lips were half-parted, her eyes luminous—luminous as the sea. All about her was the perfume of the sea—and mingling with that perfume, her own: violets and lilies: the perfume of their honeymoon-time: the perfume of her young body, of her shining hair.

God, their honeymoon-time! The first delight of her: all those other nearer, dearer delights. Did she understand—this lovely sea-witch—a tithe of what those delights had meant to

him, of the restraint he had put upon himself lest he should over-do delight? Of course she didn't understand. And he didn't want her to understand. She was his Irene, his child-woman, pure . . .

A roll of the ship—or so he thought—swayed her towards him; swayed her into his open arms. And suddenly he knew that he was kissing her, passionately, on the sea-salt mouth; that her sea-salt mouth was answering his kisses; and that in her kisses, too, was passion—passion not of budding womanhood, but of womanhood full blown, desirous, dumb with desire.

They were both dumb in that moment; and even thereafter their words, as she clung to him, came only in fragments, wind-blown between their kisses, wind-blown under the moon.

"John, why did you?"
"What?"
"Give Rupert that cabin."
"I——"
"You shouldn't have."
"Darling!"
"I—I'd like you to be with me. To-night."
"I, too——"
"Couldn't you?"
"How could I?"
"Your cabin then?"
"Impossible! The ship . . ."
"Never mind the ship."
"But I must. . . . This wind. . . . To-morrow."
"To-morrow!"

At that her hands dropped from him. The moon had gone out again; and he could no longer see her face. Her face was white—white and writhen with rage. Her breasts were constricted—hard as bone under the silk of her frock. Why had she been such a fool; let John know her for what she was? Had he known her for what she was? Perhaps not. Of course not. Did that matter? Did anything matter—except that to-night neither of them wanted her—neither the husband nor the lover—neither of her two men? Yes—one other thing mattered: Self-control.

With a fantastic effort she controlled herself; laughed up at him, "John, aren't we being silly"; and let him lead her back to the saloon.

Rupert and Tom had both left the saloon. She managed another laugh; managed to tell John that her headache was gone; managed to let him kiss her, husbandly, on the cheek;

managed that he should not escort her to her cabin ; managed—though her fingers shook like fiddle-strings—to undress.

§ 2

Watching Irene go, John Masterson knew himself still passion-shaken, hot with the want of her, almost trembling with desire. Never before had she spoken with him, kissed with him, as she had spoken with him, kissed with him just now. Never before had his physical need of her been so urgent, so difficult to restrain. And why should he restrain his need for her ? She was his wife—his wife !

" If only it weren't for the ship," he told himself ; and so telling began to be afraid—for the first time in his existence—lest the sea should wreck his ship, wreck all his happiness, rob him of all his nights with Irene, as it had robbed him of this one.

He tried to control his fear ; but the fear continued : and presently he began to pace the *Minotaur*, now forward of her, and now aft. Never before had he so considered the frailty of the *Minotaur*, the wreckableness of the *Minotaur*, the uncertainty of the sea. And every time his pacing took him aft of the *Minotaur*, the sea bade him observe, through the shutter-chinks of Irene's porthole, those glimmers of yellow light which shewed her not yet asleep.

" You want her," hissed the sea. " But I forbid your wanting. I am danger. I am duty. Your duty to your passengers. Your duty to your ship."

An hour passed thus : and another hour. Six bells struck. Seven. At eight bells, he watched Mr. Kennedy take the wheel. There was no moon now ; nor were there stars ; nor any light-glimmer through the shutter-chinks of the port deck-cabin. The wind, veering, had slackened ; and the needle of the log held steady at a bare seven knots.

" I'd turn in now if I were you, sir," said Mr. Kennedy.

The tone of the voice told Masterson that his old sailing-master thought him over-cautious ; that his old sailing-master would not have battened her down, would have kept her under foresail and forestaysail ; that his old sailing-master resented having been ordered to take the wheel.

" Perhaps I am being over-cautious," he admitted to himself ; but his fears, for all the admission, refused to abate.

Leaving Mr. Kennedy at the wheel, he made his way forward and up the rope-ladder to the bridge-deck. The look-out man

he had stationed on the bridge-deck was alert. His own night glasses shewed him never a light upon the sea.

"Yes. We're well out of the steamer lanes, sir," said the look-out man in answer to his question; and the A.B., also—he could not help realizing—thought him over-cautious, inclined to panic.

A trifle annoyed, he descended the rope-ladder; turned in to his cabin; worked out another dead reckoning; calculated that his last tack had given him more than enough offing to ride out any eventuality; decided on a night-cap, and—discovering that there was no whiskey in the bridge-house cabin—made his way back to the saloon.

In the saloon, everything recalled his want of Irene. Over the piano-top, where the Cricklites had burned out in their crystals, hung a scarf she had been wearing. The instrument itself was still open. Closing it, his nostrils again gave him the perfume of violets and lilies. He had a vision of her, sitting there playing that wind-blown music: other visions of her: lovely intimate visions that went through him as the music had gone through him while he listened to it among his men.

He loved her so! And to-night—on the leaping foredeck—her love had matched, over-matched his own. No—not over-matched it—just responded to it—as a wife's love should respond to her husband's passion. "John, aren't we being silly!" How the words rang in his ears! How innocent she still was—and how pure!

"Is my Ras still wakeful?" A different voice broke in upon Masterson's musing; and looking up he saw Menelik.

Menelik, for some reason best known to himself, had spoken in Amharic instead of the English he now affected with his European clothes; and automatically Masterson answered in the same tongue, "It behoves me to be wakeful on account of this ship. But now, soon, I sleep. Bring whiskey."

"As the Ras commands."

The Abyssinian went out, noiselessly as he had come in. When he returned, with the decanter and the soda-syphon, he said, still speaking the Amharic, "Let the Ras sleep. His servant watches." But the words, and the look which accompanied them, conveyed little or nothing to an absorbed mind. His brown servant, in the old days, had been much given to the racial floweriness of speech; and Masterson's mind was still with his wife.

Alone, sipping his whiskey at the clamped table, it seemed to him that he had been foolish to let his duty to the *Minotaur*

come between him and his wife, that he had exaggerated his fears for the *Minotaur*.

" Duty ! " he thought. " Why do I always make a fetish of it ? There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing ! "

Then, weary with thought and the unaccustomed sea-air, he began to dream that he had disregarded duty, gone to Irene's cabin ; hugged the dream till it became drowse, till he felt his head nodding, his eyes closed . . . and he knew, at the very instant his eyes were closing, that the hurricane was on his ship.

§ 3

The hurricane gave never another second's warning. At one moment Masterson, both elbows on the table, was nid-nodding over his glass. At the next, the glass had leaped from between his elbows, had crashed against the figured panels.

The crash of the glass woke him ; and as he woke, the table seemed to lift ; to try to pin him against the side of the saloon. From the piano, the Cricklite crystals described two distinct arcs ere they, too, hit the panelling. Above his head, the big oil-lamp swung straight out on its pendant ; stood rigid, the edge of its shade touching the *carte-en-pierre* ceiling ; expired.

And after that there followed—while he fought to free himself from the side of the saloon—noise, storm-noise, roaring of wind and roaring of water, the tinkle of the falling lamp-chimney as it struck the clamps of the table. Under his back-muscles he felt the side of the saloon lurch, lurch again.

Seamanship told him that the *Minotaur* had careened her lee-rail clean under. His ears told him that water had broken over her—come inboard like a drove of stampeding cattle. He heard the hoofs of the water stamping on the porthole shutter at his head, as he fought to release himself from the table ; as he crawled upwards on hands and knees to the port door of the saloon.

The port door swung to as he reached it, swung open again as the *Minotaur* freed her starboard-rail from the grip of the waves. He staggered to his feet ; staggered to the door ; clawed his way through it ; clawed his way on deck.

On deck, all was chaos. Gray sea-spume blinded him, and black wind. Knee-deep in water, he battled against the sea-spume and the wind ; caught the brass rail at the side of the saloon ; clung there, while the lee-side dipped again and another huge wave rose inboard, broke foaming over the saloon-deck above his head. Then he clawed on, along the brass rail, towards the wheel.

He reached the gig; realized the gig must have been stove in by the pressure of her gunwale against the davits; stumbled, between the stove-in gig and the streaming scuppers, across the body of a man.

The man, Menelik, was only half-conscious. Somehow, he managed to help him up; to help him back to the saloon; to push him through the saloon-door into comparative safety; to win to the gig again, to win round the angle of the port cabin, to the step of the mizzen-mast.

There, more water came inboard—a smashing mass of sea-water that half-blinded him, threw him to his knees. Vaguely, in his half-blindness, he became aware of the binnacle-lamp, of two hands on the handles of the wheel. So Kennedy, thank God, had not been swept over-board when the storm struck; was still at the wheel!

The sea slid out-board, giving him a second's respite Respited, he staggered from his knees; tried to cross the twenty feet of deck between him and Kennedy; tried too late; felt the water-logged planking heel under his shoes; felt the water-logged planking turn him over; fell; grabbed hemp in the falling; saw a black wall with a white coping surge mountain-high at him above the starboard-rail; saw the white coping break and the black wall topple; felt the toppling wall strike; went wholly blind; felt the bricks of the toppling wall tear at him, wrench his arms almost from their sockets as he hung on—hung on for dear life to the mizzen-swifter.

It seemed a thousand centuries before Masterson's sight came back to shew him the man-deep water a-swirl over the port rails; before he felt the *Minotaur* right herself; before he dared let go the mizzen-swifter which had saved him from death, and stagger—dazed, bruised, and sea-drenched—to Kennedy and the wheel.

"Hang on, sir," bawled Kennedy—but his bawl was a whisper in the shriek of the wind. "Hang on, sir. Take a hand."

Still dazed, Masterson grabbed for the spokes; kicked his shoes off; braced his stockinged feet against the wheel-barrel; took the tiller-strain. The tiller fought against the wheel. The whole ship was bucking, bucking like a saddle-galled horse. Spoon-drift filled the air. The binnacle-lamp had gone out. The pair of them could see nothing, not even each other's fingers on the wheel.

Now the hurricane caught her again, caught her and worried her as hounds worry their fox after the kill. Now a shout carried from forward—and they knew that the watch was

tumbling on deck. And now, just for a second, the spoon-drift cleared and they had a glimpse of the mizzen-mast, of the trysail.

The mizzen-mast trysail might have been yellow iron on its gaff—a door of yellow iron that wrenched at a black iron halliard. Both of them shouted orders; shouted too late. Both of them heard the halliard part with a noise like gun-fire; heard the gaff smash; saw the yellow iron door of trysail crack clean across; leave the mizzen like a blown albatross, vanish into the whirling spoon-drift, vanish to sea.

"Thank God for that," thought both of them.

A water-mountain rose astern; fell inboard; fell over them where they clung to the wheel; and as their eyes unblinded they saw lightning split the skies from vault to sea-floor; saw the whole sea-floor, the whole ship luminous; saw the other watch tumble up from the forecastle; heard Milford bellow, "Jib, there. In jib. In jib."

"Gaff!" bellowed Masterson. "Two men—the mizzen gaff."

"Aye, aye, sir," bellowed back a voice out of sudden dark.

Came more lightning, flash after flash of it that tore the heavens as a girl's hands tear calico. Two men, clasp-knives in their teeth, had swarmed the mizzen ratlines; had gained the cross-tree; were hacking at the raffle of the gaff. The raffle of the gaff went out-board—like a shattered sapling—across a sea that shewed hard as black and white marble under the riven skies.

"Stout work," thought Masterson; and Kennedy, "What a sea!"

They began luffing her; luffing her up to the sea; luffing her nto the very eye of the hurricane. The first worst blast of the hurricane was by; but not the danger of it. Lightning-zigzag after lightning-zigzag shewed Masterson his sailing-master's face. His sailing-master's face was set, anxious; one yellow dog's tooth reaching forward for the under-lip every time they snatched another quarter-point from the spokes of the wheel. Then lightning ceased; and he, too, grew anxious—anxious for his wife.

His wife was so close to him—within hail of him. And she might be in terror—she might have been hurt. He wanted to call to her, to go to her. But it was no use calling. And he might not go. Because even if she were in terror, even if she had been hurt, his duty lay here—here with Kennedy—here with his ship.

The *Minotaur* had ceased to buck. Her standing-jib must be in, only her double-reefed main-trysail now flying. He could

feel the spokes steadying themselves in his hands ; feel the whole ship steadying herself as a good hunter steadies himself over ridge-and-furrow. The ridges and the furrows of the waves had grown more regular. She was riding them, shaking the water from her decks as she rode. But he knew that they had to go on luffing her ; luffing her quarter-point by snatched quarter-point into the eye of the hurricane. The hurricane was solid now, solid as a sand-blast ; all the air full of spoon-drift again, blinding. He could hardly see his two sailors swarm down from the mizzen-ratlines ; hardly see them as they began to make all fast.

Five minutes more went by ; ten ; twenty. Duty made him unconscious of time, conscious only of the hurricane. The hurricane had lost force. The barometer must be rising. The hurricane was little more than a gale now, and the worst of the darkness lifting. Looking up, he could see cloud-scuds, blown stars, the wreck of their wireless aerial whipping at the main.

" Can you hold her ? " he asked Kennedy.

" Not alone, sir."

The two sailors who had swarmed down from the mizzen-ratlines were still making all fast. He signalled to one of them ; gave him his place at the wheel.

" Going forward," he told Kennedy.

Making his way forward along the port rails—the gale still blowing great guns and the spoon-drift slashing at his eyes—he remembered Menelik. But the port door of the saloon—though he wrenched his hardest at the handles—would not open. Wind jammed it against him—and the sheer gravity of the luffed ship. Again he thought of Irene—penned in her cabin—frightened—hurt, perhaps. Again he told himself not to think of her, nor of Menelik, but only of his ship. Then he went on.

The gale fought with him, wrestled with him as his hands clawed their way along the rails and his stockinged feet slithered on the sodden planks. Wind and water were loud in his ears, in his nostrils. He could feel the wind tugging at him, trying to lug his knees from under him as he stumbled over the lashings of the cutter, as he reached the port door of the bridge-house, as he clung there, gasping for breath.

At the knighthead, sou-wester ed men were lashing the jib in its gaskets. With them, worked his boatswain and Milford. He shouted for his boatswain as he hauled himself round the bridge-house into the full drive of the gale. The boatswain came as he could.

" Port door of the saloon's jammed," shouted Masterson. " Good job, too. But batten her if you can."

" Aye, aye, sir."

The boatswain, dripping in his oilskins, dived through the pianks and canvas over the forecastle companion-way; re-emerged, the carpenter following; was blown aft. Joining Milford at the knighthead, Masterson's thoughts went to Irene for the third time; giving him pictures of her, lying unconscious where that first worst hurricane-smash might have flung her—lying helpless, a great gaping wound in her head.

But still he dared not think over-much of Irene. For another storm-flurry was on them, and the bare jib-boom quivering like a whangee cane to every pitch of the ship. Over that quivering jib-boom, spray surged in-board. Overside, the dun sea boiled as with steam. Overhead, cloud-slather after cloud-slather rode its mad broomstick down the crazy race-course of the tilting stars.

" How long ? " thought Masterson. " How long till I may go to her ? How long ? "

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

§ 1

HALF-PAST three in the morning. And at last he could go to his Irene, assure himself of her safety. For already the force was out of the gale, and the sea abating. He had re-hoisted the jib; set double-reefed foresail, staysail, foretopsail. A good ten knots, they must be making—with never a cloud to fog the stars, and never another ship-light visible to the look-out man he had stationed in the cross-trees aloft. His boatswain was at the wheel, too; and Milford standing by. No—there couldn't be any risk in going to Irene now; in just making certain, even if she slept, that all was well with her.

A little proud—as who, having captained a tall ship through tempest, is not a little proud at the accomplishment—John Masterson stripped off his sopping oil-skins; kicked off his sea-boots; found dry shoes under his bunk; grabbed a torch, a bunch of keys from where they hung above the chart-table; opened the door which led from the captain's cabin through the battened deck-houses, and began to make his way aft.

All the deck-house lamps had been blown out—and he needed his torch. His torch-beam shewed him a narrow passage—its uncarpeted floor pitching every time the *Minotaur* breasted a wave. At the end of this passage was the engine-room companion-way; beyond, an emergency-door to the saloon.

He flashed his torch down the engine-room companion-way; heard a dour Scottish voice, "I'm no holding with it. Tempting providence—is sail"; smiled to himself; rounded the companion-way; unlocked the emergency-door; and entered the saloon.

There—knowing the Abyssinian's habit of "staying put" when in terror, and his terror of all natural portents such as storm—he had expected to find Menelik. But the circle of his torch-beam, switched rapidly from inclined floor to figured panels and *carte-en-pierre* ceiling, revealed only sodden furniture, sodden curtains, the wreck of the lamp-pendant, and a moving carpet of dirty yellow water, to and fro in which, where it lay

thickest under the clamped table, bobbed a little collection of miscellaneous objects—the tray Menelik had used to bring his whiskey, the silver neck of the smashed decanter, the whiskey-bottle itself, the two unbroken Cricklite crystals, a book (the one Starleigh had been trying to read before he went to bed) and the scarf Irene had left hanging over the piano. Automatically, he retrieved the scarf; stuffed it into the wet pocket of his reefer jacket; and opened the door which led towards the deck-cabins.

In this narrow passage-way, too, no lamps were burning; but here there seemed less movement, almost none, to the ship. His torch-beam, flashing straight ahead, shewed no damage except one flower-vase, fallen from its bracket and cracked to flinders in the falling. Just beyond this fallen flower-vase, was the door which led to the bathroom. Either side of that door hung two curtains, the one, on his left, over the entrance to the starboard cabins; the other, on his right, over the entrance of the cabins to port. And whether—as the circle of his torch-beam touched the hem of that right-hand curtain—it was jungle-instinct or actual sight which loosened his thumb from the torch-trigger, John Masterson never knew.

He only knew that he stood in pitch darkness; that his ears —long deafened with loud water-noises, with the bawling of orders, and the creaking of timber, and the whine of pulley-blocks and the boom of sail—were now straining after a subtler sound, trying to interpret it.

Behind him (had he only hooked, not latched that door which led out of the saloon?) sound told of water swishing to and fro, of broken glass in the water, of the music-holder just rattling against the wood of the piano; outside, of the wind still falling, of a still abating sea. Nothing to startle one there! But this sound—just in front of one—just a man's length in front? What could this sound mean? What could this sound be?

Very slowly—his torch still out and his rubber-soled shoes velvet on the velvet pile of the carpet—Masterson approached that right-hand curtain; listened at it; and heard—even as he had suspected—breathing; the hard-held breathing of a man.

"Who?" he thought. "Who?" And the next instant his nose rather than his ears told him that the man was a native, Menelik. What in the name of the devil could Menelik be doing; whom, in the name of all the devils, could Menelik be watching —here?

Then Menelik's voice whispered, "Is it thou, my Ras? Nay, do not answer, for thy feet make no noise; so that I know it must

be thou "—and before Masterson's brain could give him another thought, the Abyssinian had stepped back, letting the curtain fall to behind him; and they faced one another in the narrow passage-way.

As Menelik faced him in the narrow passage-way, anger, and not fear, set Masterson's thumb pressing for the torch-trigger; but fear kept it there—kept it there for a full five seconds while the beam, half blinding him, held steady on Menelik's brown eyes. For all through those five seconds, those brown eyes were as a gateway—as a gateway into hell.

They were no longer subservient, those eyes. They no longer wore the menial look of the semi-Europeanized valet who moved so quietly up and down the wide hotel-like landings of Carlton House Terrace; but an older look, savage, calling up the past.

In the past, was a dusty compound, and a mad Menelik, a Menelik in a *chamma*, a Menelik with blood-injected pupils, brandishing a bloody knife. "I slew her," shrieked that Menelik. "I cut off her breasts. It is good to cut off their breasts when the milk of them is befouled. It is good to slay them in their harlotry. Aye—it is good. It is good!"

The gateway into hell closed. Fear went. The past, and with it other recollections—the face of Menelik's faithless wife, slashed out of recognition, the flies gathering to the blood on her slashed breasts, the Gourage who had fled screaming, the wailing in the huts beyond the compound, and the snarling of the Abyssinian dogs—vanished. In immediate sight, was only Menelik's brown wrist—his wrist and the knife.

Wordless, reacting to the immediate impulse, Masterson grappled that wrist, gripped it till the tendons cracked under his hand. His only thought was to disarm the man. Blood there might be—blood and red murder—in Menelik's eyes; but as yet—he knew—there had been no blood upon his knife. Nor did the bloodless knife make any but the one sound as it fell; as it buried its point, stood quivering between them.

"Dost think that I would have harmed *thee?*" said Menelik—the grip tight as a hand-cuff on him, the voice low between his pain-clenched teeth.

"Whom then would'st thou harm?" Masterson's grip closed tighter; and his tense Amharic lashed like a mule-driver's thong. "Art thou mad? Has the storm crazed thee? Would'st thou slay? Whom would'st thou slay? Thy master's friends, perchance? Thy master's wife?"

"Nay," said Menelik. "Nay. Not now, Ras. Now that thou art safe, that duty is for thee."

Followed silence; and in that silence Menelik feared for his life. His master's grip racked as the torture racks; his master's eyes, behind the slanting torch-beam, were the eyes of the white man when he does justice—stone-eyes, blind to appeal. Then the grip loosened; the torch-beam went out; and his master spoke.

"Dog—and son of a dog—explain thyself!"

"What is there for thy servant to explain, Ras? Surely thou knewest. And when thy servant knew, when he saw——"

"Saw what? Speak and be brief."

"To-night—when thou wast gone—they kissed. Later, I watched. Outside—where thou did'st find me. Before the storm, she called to him. Low—very low. But thy servant heard. Before the storm, he went in to her—and they lay together."

"Thou liest."

"Thy servant speaks truth. Surely thou knewest; but could'st not prove thy knowledge. He is with her now. Had the ship sunk, had'st thou come to harm by the ship, I would have killed for thee. But since thou art come, kill thou! Twice—and swiftly. For such is thy right."

And with that—a shadow in the darkness—the Abyssinian was gone.

§ 2

In unexpected physical danger, the brains of normal men loose their bodies to instant action; act as the hair-trigger to the needle of the gun. But in the unexpected crisis—even in those moments of spiritual cataclysm when the abnormal, panicking, are reft of self-control—some secret mechanism in those brains steadies the primeval impulse; and the body answers them slowly, as the Nasmyth hammer answers to the turning of its wheel.

So it was now with John Masterson. Soul-shocked, soul-sickened, soul-defeated, his whole conception of the universe crashing like a bombed glass cupola about his defenceless head —the secret mechanism of his brain yet kept its sanity, and his body the balance of the sea. The secret mechanism said "Stand!" to his body; and for fifteen seconds, for thirty, for a whole minute after the saloon door had closed behind the shadow of Menelik's back, his body made only the one simultaneous movement of clicking on the torch, of focussing the torch-beam—away from that right-hand curtain—upon the floor.

There, on the floor—standing as it had fallen, two inches of razored point skewering the red carpet to the oak below—stood the knife. The haft of the knife called to him ; called loud to his primeval impulses that he should take its black wood in his hand. " Kill thou ! " the knife-haft seemed to be repeating. " Twice—and swiftly. For such is thy right."

Yes—but had he that right, had he even reason for his killing ? What worth attached to the evidence of a native ? Menelik might have deceived himself. Menelik might have lied. Yet Menelik never *had* lied—not once in all the seven years of his service ! And what purpose could Menelik have had with his lying ?

Another quarter-minute passed ; and now—as the full horror of this incredible, of this unclean thing, came home to him—John Masterson, bending, picked up the knife.

Why the knife ? If . . . if this incredible, this unclean thing were true, he would need no knife, only his own naked hands.

That madness went from him ; and once more its secret mechanism steadied his brain. " She's your wife," said his brain. " He's your good comrade. Would you condemn them unjudged, on hearsay, on a native's whisper in the dark ? " And even as his brain asked the question there came to Masterson—overwhelmingly—doubt. This—this unclean horror couldn't be true. Oceans might run dry, the stars change their courses, the whole earth crash headlong—but Irene would still be Irene, Rupert Rupert ; his wife the one, and the other his friend.

" Did he go to her before the storm ? " asked his doubt. " Or after ? As any man might have done. To comfort her, to see that she was safe."

Yet, in doubt's despite, there was no comfort, and no safety in all John Masterson's universe as he lifted that right-hand curtain, passed through it, and let his torch-beam rest on the brass handle of the farther door.

Farther door and nearer were both shut. Through neither came any sound. He could hear only one sound—the sound of the wind booming across the sea. He had saved these two from the sea, while they, while they . . .

One last second Masterson stood actionless ; and in that second all the Berserk of some Viking ancestor set his muscles quivering. Then, quivering no longer, he lifted the knife-haft in his steady fist, and knocked—knocked loud upon the door.

No answer followed upon his knocking. He knocked again.

Still no answer—but a murmur as of two voices; some movement, as of feet. So they were both there. Both of them!

Swiftly now—before either of them could bar the door—John Masterson slipped torch to pocket; set hand to door-handle; opened—and went in.

There was light in the cabin—a glass-sheathed candle burning above the bed. On the bed—half in and half out of it—lay Irene. By her, stood the man he had thought his friend. He had his shoes on, that man. Red Morocco bedroom shoes. Everything about him was red—his eyes, his hair, the flesh at the neck above the open pyjamas. Yes! Red! Red as spilt blood.

For now, awfully, John Masterson knew that Menelik had spoken truth; and with that knowledge the righteous blood-lust of primeval man. The blood-lust made his hands itch. "Your knife!" shouted the blood-lust. "There. At his neck. One stab. Downwards. Then the woman—the woman he has defiled."

And now Rupert Starleigh looked upon the knife; and in him, looking, was primeval fear.

Must he, Rupert Starleigh, die because of this worthless woman who had lured him—snared him—kept him in her snare? If so, better die fighting—fighting this woman's owner for his knife.

So, for a long second, those two stood—eyeing one another; and the woman on the bed eyed both. Were they both mad, those two? Would John use his knife—do murder? And just as that last word flashed through Irene's brain, the same word flashed through Masterson's: so that civilization's law grappled him—gripped him as he had gripped Menelik, by the wrist.

The knife fell from him—fell and clattered from his hands. But his hands were still itching—itching and clenching for his man. And now, fear-driven, his man moved—moved for his dropped knife.

And, "Damn you," said that John Masterson who rarely swore. "Damn your bloody eyes, Rupert. If you want to fight —fight fair."

Then his right foot trod upon the knife; his right fist shot for Rupert's face; Rupert guarded; and they were at it.

Followed fighting; the flash of Rupert's fist for John's jaw; the smash of a blow half-landed; the slither of Rupert's unshod feet; John's counter; the tense, teeth-set breathing of John. And as she watched that fighting, as she crouched from it upon her bed, Irene remembered other fighting—the fighting of Kynes

against Brackley. A killer, that Brackley! And a killer, this John!

John's face was horrible. Sweat pearled it. There was blood —Rupert's blood—on his torn knuckles.

Blood! The red reality petrified her; rooted her back against the cabin-wall; rooted her tongue to her palate, her fingers to her breasts. Her breasts ached—ached for the white body of her lover Rupert! Her tongue wanted to scream—to scream that John should not kill her lover Rupert. But her tongue could not scream. And the fight went on.

Up and down they fought—now close on her and now away. The cabin rocked to their fighting—the candle quivered to it. She prayed for the candle to go out—to hide them from her. And praying, she hated John.

John was a Yahoo—a hooligan. He was clinching Rupert—had his great arms round Rupert—was crushing him to death. Rupert's breath whistled—whistled through his nose, through his teeth. Why didn't Rupert break from John?

Rupert *had* broken from John; was crouching from him, as Kynes had crouched—long ago—from Brackley. Rupert and Kynes! Brackley and John!

And now Rupert was fighting again—dodging a blow—giving a blow—but giving back—giving back always—before the fury of John. How could Rupert fight John? What chance had Rupert's pale body against John's fury, against the rugged body of John? And what had happened to the light—to the passion-light she remembered in Rupert's, or had it been in Kynes', eyes?

That light had gone out; but the candle—the candle above her head—still shivered radiance on the fight. No! The fight was over. This was butchery—butchery. John's fists were pounding Rupert—pounding him where he crouched against the wall. Blood trickled from Rupert's nostrils, from the corners of his mouth. Rupert's eyes were dazed, glazed; his knees tottering under him.

Why couldn't she scream—scream out for Tom Trevor that he should come and save Rupert—save him from the fury of John? Why should she scream—she who hated both these men—the weakling and his butcher—the weakling Rupert and his butcher John?

And just as that hate reached climax, John Masterson's last blow landed, pile-thudding, between the pale eyebrows of his senseless man.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

§ 1

No man, having just seen red, sees normally; and to John Masterson—his mind rocking as men's minds rock when faith goes from them and that one thing they have deemed divine turns mockery—it seemed, as he stooped over Rupert Starleigh's senseless body, that he could never again bring himself to look upon the eyes of his wife.

His wife still crouched—as he had been aware of her crouching all through those three minutes of desperate fight—at the far edge of that bed whereon she and her paramour had betrayed him. The very sound of her breathing sickened him. She was unclean—this woman who might have been (God, who might still be!) the mother of his children. Unclean, and a harlot—as that other wife, Menelik's, whom Menelik had knifed to her death.

Death! Was Rupert Starleigh—perhaps—dead?

He stooped closer to Rupert Starleigh; looked at the great lump swelling between his eyebrows, at the blood dripping from his mouth. Had he killed this thing—this bashed and senseless thing? Then the thing stirred; and as it did so he was aware of a man's voice, Tom's.

"I say," said Tom. "I say . . ."

The words were ludicrous; and Tom Trevor's appearance matched them—for he had come hurriedly, snatched overcoat over striped pyjamas, to the noise of the fight. Yet the words, for all their ludicrousness, recalled Masterson's vision to its everyday sanity.

That vision shewed him, as he rose from his stooping, Irene, moving now on the bed; the havoc the fight had made of the cabin; his own face, blood-marked, in the cracked mirror over the wash-stand; the face of Trevor, questioning his deed.

"Help me carry this swine out," he said to Trevor—and his voice was as no voice of his which Irene had ever known. "I

haven't killed him—if that's what you're thinking. And mind you don't cut your feet on that knife."

Tom Trevor, in a difficult situation, had his points. In this one, he neither stuttered, nor argued ; merely picked up the knife, looked at it, flung it on to the narrow sofa under the porthole—and did as he was bid.

"Take his shoulders," bade Masterson. "I'll manage his legs. We'll put him in his own cabin till he comes round." To Irene, while the pair of them toted Rupert through the door, he spoke never a word.

Outside the door, Tom, unstammering, asked one question. "Was it your knife?"

"Menelik's," answered Masterson—and again, to the tensely listening Irene, the voice was unrecognizable for his.

The two men spent some minutes in the next cabin ; and though they spoke low, she managed to overhear an occasional word.

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not tell you, Tom. It's—it's too damned filthy."

"All right. I'm not c-curious."

Filthy—she !

She was out of bed by that time ; and the word sent her livid.

Maniacally, her eyes went to the knife. A man's weapon, the knife. She had a keener—one that would hurt a thousand-fold more—her tongue. He should have his tongue-lashing, this butcher : this hooligan whose feet had trampled her evening shoes, who had torn her evening frock from its peg, trampled her new evening frock to rags upon the floor.

Did he think *her* afraid of him, as Rupert had been afraid, in that moment when his knock had broken Rupert from her arms, when they had seen his face coming at them through the open door? Did he think she would let him call her "filthy"—kow-tow to him—to this . . . this fool who hadn't known how to hold her, who had driven her—yes, driven her—to another fool, to a weakling, to a coward who couldn't defend himself in a fight? Did he think that of her, this . . . this bungler? Very well, then. He should see.

Hurriedly—her face still livid but every muscle in it working for self-control—Irene Masterson snatched the first clothes at hand, the white wrap she had worn on deck, a pair of bed-room slippers ; donned them ; listened again. The two men were coming back. The two men were just outside. She heard

Tom say, " You—you w-won't do her any harm " ; heard John answer, " No. Leave us. I won't do her any harm."

Harm ! And he loved her—this bungler—this fool.

§ 2

John Masterson, closing the door of his wife's cabin behind him, hardly knew what impulse had brought him to her, what word there might be to say. Love, stricken to the death, still writhed in him ; making him dumb before her. Why had she hurt him so, his child-woman ? Why had she turned his love of her to hate ?

He did hate her. The very sight of her was poison to his eyes. She looked as Ivor. She was as Ivor—dishonest, a liar and a cheat. No ! Worse ! Far worse even than Ivor !

" Tell me the truth," he said at last. " How long has this —this intrigue been going on ? "

She did not answer ; only faced him, malice in her eyes. The ship was pitching a little ; and her eyes wavered—wavered up and down in front of his.

" Tell me the truth," he repeated.

" Why should I ? "

At that, anger rose in him ; and his voice became the voice of command.

" Because I order you to, Irene."

" And if I don't choose to take orders from you ? "

" I want the truth, please. How long has this—this filthy intrigue been going on ? "

" Perhaps you'd better not know."

Filthy ! And he said it to her face !

" I insist upon knowing, Irene."

Silence ; and in that silence, she had the impulse to hold her hand. Why not say it had been the first time ? He might believe her. He would believe her—if she told her lie well, if she cried, if she went to him. But rage stayed the impulse, carried her on.

" If you insist," she said, her lips curling, " of course you must know. Rupert was in love with me before I met you."

" That's no answer to my question."

" Isn't it ? "

" No."

" Can't a man be a girl's lover without . . ."

Only her eyes, her smile, explained the rest of Irene's mean-

ing; yet looking on her, Masterson's love writhed for the last time; writhed, and died writhing in his breast. The uncleanliness of her—the sheer physical uncleanliness of this creature he had deemed so pure!

She was speaking again. "A month ago, I went back to him. Mainly because I was dissatisfied. Do you understand me? Because *you* didn't satisfy me. Because I was bored. And to-night, when you wouldn't do as I asked you . . ."

She talked on, and he listened. What did her talk matter? What did anything matter now—now that he knew her for a wanton, for vile. Why, the whole world was vile, putrid, a garbage-heap. A garbage-heap of that thing she kept calling, "Sex."

"Sex," she kept saying. "Men like you think we haven't got any—that we're different. . . . Sex. Most women are hypocrites about it. I'm not a hypocrite. I believe in paying cash for everything. Do you remember my telling you that? . . . That's why I'm telling you all this. . . . You'll divorce me, of course. . . . So much the better. . . . I shan't care. . . . I'm not sentimental, you see, like you are. . . . You think I went with Rupert because I loved him. . . . You thought, when you used to come to my room, that I loved you. So did Rupert. . . . Love! Why there isn't such a thing. There's only sex."

And at that, she laughed—maniacally, nymphomaniacally—knowing how she had hurt him, knowing that she had paid him back for that word he had called her, privily once, and once to her face.

"Is there anything more you'd like to know about me?" she laughed. "Or is that enough?"

But now neither her words nor her laughter penetrated to Masterson's mind. His mind was not with this Irene—with this loose-lipped wanton of the reckless speech, and the restless eyes—but with the dead Irene, with the child-woman who had been mistress of his home. Had she been all illusion, that dead Irene? Had imagination alone made her for him? All of her? All?

Silence again—and the ship pitching—and the candle burnt low in its glass-sheathed socket—and the porthole shutter starting to rattle—and outside, surely, the dawn. But here, no dawn—only darkness—darkness of hate. Had they always hated one another—he and she?

She was laughing again. But still the laughter might not penetrate. Had they always hated one another? Hadn't there been a time, in this very cabin . . .

Thinking of that time, anger renewed itself in him ; and with anger, words.

" I've done with you," said his words. " It's all finished. At least I hope it's all finished. Tell me one thing before I go."

" Yes." Her eyes flared at him—flared green with the fury of her rage. " Yes. What ? "

" Why did you marry me ? For my money ? For what you could get ? "

She might have denied that ; might have saved him the one hurt. She had not married this bungler, this hooligan, for his money : but for the thing that didn't exist, Love. She, too, had been a fool. Cave-man, forsooth ! As though her sophistication wanted cave-men. But her rage still drove her, told her to make him pay—in so far as man could pay—for her folly.

" Naturally," she said. " Naturally, I married you for what I could get. What else would a girl marry you for—put up with you for—run the risk of having your children ? "

" Risk," repeated Masterson—and the rasp of the single syllable would have terrified any but a woman out of herself, crazy after discovery, crazy after the sight of blood.

" Yes. Risk. You didn't imagine—did you ?—that it was just luck, my not having a baby ? "

This time, it did not need any smile to explain Irene's meaning, the whole unnatural truth. And this time, as he looked on her, the last pitiful illusion died in Masterson's breast. So it was all finished. Finished !

Silence for the last time. The ship was steady again—steady to the breezes of the dawn. Through the shutter-chinks, he could see dawn creeping in on them. The candle guttered—guttered to the last of the wick. The guttering candle shewed him a harlot mistaken for a clean woman, a prostitute mistaken for a virgin, a creature worse than any prostitute, self-steriled, fruitless—a whore. And always this creature laughed at him. And always the candle guttered. And always the dawn grew—grew in on them—lighting up the cabin, the disorder of it, and the uncleanliness of it, the bed whereon she had lain with her paramour, and the gouts of blood he had drawn from her paramour, and the horror—the sheer abysmal hell-horror—of her malicious eyes.

He could stand this hell-horror no longer. He would leave it—leave it and go cleanse himself in the breezes of the dawn.

§ 3

But there was no cleanliness in the breezes of the dawn—though the breezes had smoothed all the sea for him—though the sea glittered for him—glittered rose-lilac from horizon to horizon—though silver gulls dipped through the rose-lilac—dipped and dropped silver-breasted to the lilac of the sea.

The very sea stank for him—and his very ship : because both of these carried corruption—and because he himself had loved this corruption, mistaken it for purity, worshipped it, set it on high.

No ! There was no cleanliness in the breezes of the dawn ; no cleanliness any where, nor any more ; not for him ; not for John Masterson, who had loved the unclean, worshipped it, set it on high.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

§ 1

THE train which leaves Penzance, Cornwall, at five past two on Wednesday afternoons arrives at Paddington Station shortly before midnight; the one which leaves at twenty to nine the evening has no sleeper, and does not reach London till next day. The *Minotaur's* passengers caught the first; her owner the second of those trains.

Tom Trevor, before being rowed ashore, had said good-bye to his host in the captain's cabin; so had Tom Trevor's Cynthia. The other two, John Masterson had refused to see; and he was thinking of that refusal now, as he woke, cramped, cold and irritable after his first brief drowse since the hurricane, to observe, through the breath-blurred carriage pane, the outskirts of Town.

"I was right not to see them," he thought. "It would only have meant more lies."

For after Irene and Rupert had gone ashore, there had come to him, by the hand of one of his sailors, two letters: Rupert's brief, admitting nothing, a mere formal expression of regret: Irene's scrawled across eight pages, and ending on a note that still made his teeth grate with sheer disgust.

"Please don't take the things I said to you too seriously, dear," ended that letter. "The storm frightened me so. And you frightened me, too. That was why I tried to hurt you. If I did hurt you, forgive me. I didn't really marry you for your money, but because . . . Oh, well, just because." And, naturally, there had been a postscript. "I don't know why you wouldn't see me. It couldn't have done any harm. I don't quite know why I'm writing to you—except to let you know that I really do care."

Care! As though that unclean woman could care. . . .

And yet, unclean though now he knew her, hardly anything of the hate he had momentarily experienced towards Irene remained in John Masterson's mind. His mind, now, seemed numb. This treachery his wife had practised against him—this treachery his friend had practised against him—went so far

beyond mere hate. What could hatred avail a man when circumstance had cut at the very root of things; cut away all hope, all desire, even the desire for revenge? He, John Masterson, no longer desired revenge. Even his punishment of Rupert seemed—now that twenty-four hours separated him from it—a mere confession of his own weakness, a mere lack of self-control.

God! How weak he had been. And how blind! Any other man would have realized, a month ago, from the mere submissiveness of her, what was wrong. Any other man would have had the commonsense to suspect that separation of their bedrooms at Grinstead. Any other man would have known, at any rate after that moment with her on the foredeck, what manner of womanhood underlay those wanton words, those wanton kisses.

Wanton! Aye—but sweet.

That was the main horror of it all: that he could still think of her as sweet: that, even though love had died, passion still lived in him; making him, too, as a wanton, desirous of the unclean thing.

For it was not true that this circumstance had cut out all desire. One desire he still had. He still desired this faithless wife of his. Ached for her unclean kisses, for the perfume of her wanton hair.

An ache of the flesh. Only of the flesh. Beastly. A degradation. Not to be borne. . . .

§ 2

It was well after eight before the slow night-train reached Paddington; nearly nine before a taxi deposited John Masterson, his luggage and his brown body-servant, at the door of Carlton House Terrace.

Since the storm, Masterson had hardly spoken with Menelik; nor did any, except that one Amharic word which means "Silence," pass between them as the latch-key turned in the lock. Faithful, watchful, dutiful, Menelik was still the native, no confidant for a white man's secret—nor for the shameful secret of a white man's wife.

"Silence!" repeated Masterson; and passed into the inner hall.

There, one startled look from a housemaid kneeling with mop and pail on the unrugged marble reminded him that he had forgotten to advise his household of this return. And there he told Belton, who came hurriedly, unshaved, pulling on his

jacket as he rushed up the basement stairs, "I want some breakfast, please. At once!"

"I'm afraid that the dining-room, sir——" began Belton.

"Then bring it upstairs—to the office. And for the present don't let anyone—especially Miss Euphemia—know that I'm back."

"Very good, sir."

Quickly, Belton ran for his basement. Slowly, Masterson took the stairs. The stairs tired him; dragged at his feet. Half way up them, he paused; and as, pausing, he looked on the closed door of Irene's bedroom, his face went gray, as men's faces go gray in battle. He wanted to finish this battle; to finish it, and clear the battlefield and bury his dead. If only that last desire were dead . . .

He went on again, still more slowly; reached the fourth floor. In his sanctum, another of his housemaids was dusting. She, too, gave him a startled glance. He told her to have done with her dusting, to leave him, to tell no one of his return. She answered him with the same, "Very good, sir," and went out.

"That girl's guessed already," he thought. "And so has Belton. Maybe *they* suspected. Servants usually do suspect these things. I suppose everybody suspected—except me."

He sat down to his desk. Presently, a footman brought his breakfast. He found it difficult to eat his breakfast; more difficult still to think out what he must do.

His mind was still numb. No continuity of thought came to it—only impulses: all culminating in a single impulse, to have done with this last desire. And as that single impulse formulated itself, the curtains of the months rolled back; shewing him the man he had been—little more than a year ago. He had been a free man, then. Couldn't he cut free again?

"How can I?" he thought; and again, "Why shouldn't I? What stands between me and freedom? Money *is* freedom. The world's open to me. Can't I go?"

After all, why shouldn't he go? The law wouldn't take long to rid him of Irene.

The single impulse strengthened; turned almost to monomania. Go? Why shouldn't he go? What hindered him? Politics? A fig for politics. Money-business? A fig for his money-business. His houses? A fig for his houses. His horses? A fig for his horses—he could trust his horses, as he always had trusted them, to old Tom.

And his great purpose, his scheme for social betterment? A fig for that, too—Aubreystone and Miss Millward were capable

enough to finish the building jobs they had on hand. And there would be no more such building jobs! Because he was done with social betterment. Because what could social betterment avail when the whole world was vile, putrid, a stinking garbage heap of that thing which wantons called, Sex?

§ 3

"Mr. Masterson! I heard you were back."

The voice recalled Masterson to actualities; and, looking up, he saw Mary Millward.

"I saw your breakfast-tray come up," went on Mary Millward. "Belton told me that you weren't to be disturbed; that you didn't wish anyone to know that you were home."

"Then why disturb me?" he asked.

He had never been rude to her, never been sarcastic with her, before; and at any other time, in any other circumstance, his rudeness, his sarcasm would have hurt. But this morning Mary Millward was beyond hurt, beyond all emotions that were not for him.

Something terrible must have happened on the yacht. That much, she had realized the moment she saw his tray come up the stairs. But she was realizing more now. The very droop of John's shoulders told her that he knew the whole truth, and the very creases in John's clothes, the very look in his eyes. His eyes were like blank blue stones—and behind them dwelt a spirit she could hardly recognize for his. He was unshaven, too. John, unshaven! And his whole demeanour held tragedy—and something worse than tragedy, something that baffled her; made her altogether afraid.

"I'm sorry," she said—and made to go.

He stopped her with a gesture; muttered, a trifle unsteadily, "I'm a little harassed, this morning. I haven't had much sleep. You might tell them to clear away my breakfast. I'll ring if I want you."

"All right." Her voice, too, sounded a trifle unsteady. "I'll see they clear it away." And with that she left him; went back to her own room.

Lonsdale had already started on his Easter holiday. Her own room, his, seemed like prison-cells. But at least it was silent in the prison-cells. She could think there. And she needed to think.

Thinking, her first thought was for vengeance. Irene should be made to pay, be put to open shame. That, at least, John *must* do. But would he? He loved her so. Why

did he love her so? It was such pain—such red-hot pain—to know of his love.

The red-hot pain numbed her mind also: so that to her, too, there came, at the outset, no continuity of thought, only impulses, all culminating in the single impulse: to go to John.

Gradually, however, that impulse passed; and as it did so, love clarified all her thoughts. This was John's Gethsemane. And through all Gethsemanes, the soul must fight its way alone.

This would be—was being—the supreme test of John's manhood, almost of his soul's divinity. While he underwent it, neither woman's devotion nor man's friendship could avail.

It was strange she should know that. Yet stranger—had she but stopped to consider it—was her own selflessness. Because to-day—such was the love in her—she had no self, no being except for her man.

Her man's demeanour—when he at last rang for her—had not altered. Neither could she see any hope, nor any warmth of purpose, in the blank blue stoniness of his eyes.

"I wonder if you'd mind ringing up Haringford and Haringford," he said. "It's Mr. James Haringford I'd like to speak to. That's to say if he hasn't already left Town."

§ 4

If the history of nations always repeats itself, so, occasionally, does the history of individual men.

Once again, at three o'clock of that sunny Thursday afternoon—his chauffeurs being all on holiday—a taxi decanted John Masterson before the stone steps and the pillared Adams doorway of number ninety-nine Bedford Court Row. Once again—led, this time, by the under-sized shock-headed clerk—he followed down that dark panelled passage and through the various doors of time-blackened oak. Once again—having shaken hands—he seated himself, facing the thin light cast by the two reflectors set high outside its two tall windows, by the big desk of James Haringford's private room.

Only this time—in contradiction to that other—it was John Masterson who seemed to be in no immediate hurry; who appeared—to the anxious and suddenly perceptive Haringford—far more like a patient consulting his doctor, than a millionaire visiting his man of the law.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this, Haringford," he said at last. "But I had to have your advice at once. You see—not to put too fine a point on things—I've just had—well, we'll call it rather a shock. The fact is that my wife——"

"Your wife!" interrupted Haringford.

"Precisely. My wife. What I want to know is how soon you can get me a divorce."

The word "divorce"—contrary to Masterson's expectation—did not shock Haringford. Too many men, and too many women, had sat in that particular chair on that particular errand for him to be capable of feeling anything but a vague sort of pity that most marriages should be so much less satisfactory than his own. But what did shock him—what had been shocking him ever since John entered the room—was the immobility of John's face.

"The thing's like this," went on that immovable face. "Two days ago I started for a cruise to the Scilly Islands. My wife came with me. Her sister and brother-in-law were on board too. And another man. My stockbroker, Lord Rupert Starleigh. I say my stockbroker. Though as a matter of fact he is also—I mean he was also—one of my most intimate friends."

There—for the only time while he told his story—John Masterson paused. But when he went on there was no anger, not the slightest hint of emotion in his words.

The words emitted themselves from his lips exactly as the words of a speaking-machine, mechanically, syllable following syllable, break following break, in one dead-level flow. So that, to Haringford, the story unrolled itself like a map in monochrome, flat and colourless; or like a tragedy without a tragedian; or like a war-history written by a War Office clerk. And even when Masterson finished, even when he finally reached for his side-pocket, his voice still held that same dead-level sing-song note.

"I thought these might help a bit," he finished, and handed his two letters across the desk.

James Haringford, as he took the letters, confined speech to a brief, "Thanks, John." But his hazel eyes, as he perused them, seemed doubtful behind their shining glasses; and to John Masterson, waiting anxiously, there came—all on a sudden—the recollection of a sentence, spoken long ago, by Adrian Rose. "The law," said Adrian Rose, "doesn't happen to be interested in public morality; it's only interested in its own code."

"It looks as though they meant to fight," said Haringford, his perusal over. "These letters don't help us. Rather the reverse. She goes back on her confession. And he practically denies the whole thing——"

"But how can they fight?" asked Masterson—his voice

rising a semitone from its dead level of monotony. "I've the evidence of my own eyes."

"Quite," admitted Haringford. "But what value would that evidence have before a sympathetic jury? You can't say that he was *in bed* with her; you can only say he was standing by her bed. Now supposing that Lord Rupert Starleigh says he went to your wife's cabin on a perfectly natural impulse when he thought—as you yourself thought—that the ship was going down. He was in the next cabin to her, remember. You put him there yourself."

"But damn it"—Masterson's voice was still rising—"he was with her before the storm began."

"How are you going to prove it? Suppose they shake your native servant in cross-examination. It's all a question of time, you see. Half an hour at the outside."

"You mean—it all depends on Menelik."

"Not entirely. Still—if they do fight—they've got a case."

And, "You're looking at this business from the personal point of view," went on Haringford—while Masterson's recollection conjured up the whole of that long-ago scene with Rose. "I'm thinking of the law. Let's assume they do defend, and the case comes on. At the best, we can only call three witnesses. Yourself—the interested party. A native—whose English you describe as 'quaint.' And your wife's brother-in-law—whom we shall presumably have to sub-pœna. By the way—I don't think you told me where your wife is now?"

"At her brother-in-law's, I expect."

"H'm. That doesn't make things any easier. A wrongfully accused wife naturally would go to one of her relatives. You must lock her out, of course, if she tries to come back. And now about the petition. I'm not trying to be pessimistic, far from it; only doing my duty in shewing you the other side of the shield. I'll get the petition drawn up as soon as I get back from my holidays. Meanwhile I'll just look up the settlement deed and see——"

But at that, furiously, his mind jerked clean out of Rose's past to his own present, John Masterson broke in.

"Never mind about the settlements. How long is this case going to last? How soon can I get shot of it? How soon am I going to be free?"

To which James Haringford, somewhat taken aback, answered, "It all depends, John. If they don't defend, and we have a bit of luck, you might be in the witness-box by the end of July. Otherwise, it'll be October. But of course if we're in the defended list, and they really mean business, it'll take the best part of a year."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

One would like, as one draws near the end of John Masterson's story, to claim that all his last motives were fine motives—typical of the best in this particular type of man.

One would like to stress his innate chivalry; his innate decency; his pity for all creatures weaker and less fortunate than himself. One would like to sentimentalize and to be reminiscent about him; to picture him reminding himself of his thoughts when Adrian Rose told the story of *his* girl-bride, "Marriage is marriage. A chap can't get out of his responsibility towards his wife." And one would like to emphasize the religious sense in him, to say that in this crisis, too, he prayed.

Nor frankly—being what one is, incurably romantic—would one be averse from delineating a soul-struggle between political duty and private conduct, between the call of a man's work and the call of freedom, between profane love which comes with manhood, and sacred love, which is the first dream of a boy.

Such romanticisms, moreover, to say nothing of the revolt any white man must experience at using native evidence in a divorce-case—because truth, however straightly one may think one sees it, possesses that same relativity which exists in light—might have some foundation in actual fact.

Yet the main fact, the fundamental fact, the quintessential truth of all those conflicting motives which dictated the eventual course of action taken by our friend, John Masterson, can be summed up in the one word, Fear. And briefly put, coarsely put, crudely put, that fear sprang from the knowledge that—physically—he still wanted his faithless wife.

All the way home from Haringford's—he went on foot, slowly, through the holiday-emptying streets—that knowledge waxed in him. And once home, not a stick of furniture in his house, not a piece of drapery in it, not a colour on a wall, not a light in a cornice, not a carpet on a floor, but bade his forty-year-old body remember Irene's embodied youth, picture that embodied youth returning to him, picture himself taking that embodied youth in his arms.

"She's so young," said this house where they had lived together. "If she does return, make her youth your excuse. Don't lock her out! Forgive!" Yet all the time he knew that the fruit of her, for all its immaturity, was rotten—rotten to the core.

He told Euphemia a little that afternoon; but got no sympathy. "I've seen this coming on for some time," said Euphemia. "These modern girls are all alike. Flighty. I shouldn't trust Haringford's opinion. You ought to go to a really good K.C."

The word "flighty"—thinking it over—drove him nearly mad. And thereafter the house renewed its supplication, "Make Irene's youth your excuse. If she returns, forgive."

So that evening he fled from the house, and slept at the Caxton—if sleep it can be called.

It was barely noon on the Good Friday—for Mary Millward, after thinking and thinking if there were any least, littlest service love might render, had recalled one chauffeur from holiday and sent him early for orders to the club—when John Masterson's oldest car chugged past his grinning griffins, through the lodge-gates and up the laurel-bordered drive to the no longer formal gardens and the new stone terrace of Mastersleigh.

Keeper Hockey capped him at the gate. Daffodils were out. A white peacock strutted on the terrace. Pheasants were feeding on the edge of a lawn. Mrs. Arbuthnot, in the same funny high-waisted frock with the same miniature dangling from its gold chain on her capacious bosom, half-curtseyed to him as on that other day—the day of his first return. But John Masterson realized, instinctively, the moment he set eyes on the place, that there would be little sleep for him at Mastersleigh, and no blurring of knowledge, no surcease from his fear.

Here, too, everything within the house spoke to him of Irene. Irene's taste had redecorated even Mrs. Arbuthnot's sitting-room. He could not sit there; nor in the new winter garden where fountains plashed once more and the gold-fish ("Darling—were there really gold-fish—then we must have them too") gaped for their ants' eggs in the marble basins; nor in his library; nor in the new gun-room with the old crest still stuccoed above the rack. For knowledge made him restless in all these rooms —till fear drove him without.

And without the house, too—though want left him in the open —dwelt fear.

The grassland beyond the second postern of the big walled kitchen-garden—bare as a plate with the cloud-shadows skimming

it—was no longer his hill of escape. If the wind whistled, it whistled only of other winds—of the cloud-burst on the face of Mount Zequala, and dust-devil chasing dust-devil across the Salali plains. No other memories did the hill hold for him—and boyhood's dream, that earliest most fragrant Mary-dream, was dead.

Fear killed that dream, and all other dreams; killed even the horse-lover in him. He had no more joy of his horses—though Peter the Great whinnied to him from the paddock by the stream, and Samarcand's colt nosed him for sugar, and new brood-mares snuffled unafraid as he spoke with their foals.

No! There was no joy, no comfort, for him among his horses; nor in the snuggery of that unpretentious gray stone house with the winter jasmine already flowerless over its outer door. For old Tom's talk as they sat together in the snuggery went always to the future: "You wait, Mr. John—you wait and see how we'll surprise 'em—after next year."

Must he wait—could he wait—till next year for legal freedom? Would legal freedom help him—cure him—purge him of this last desire?

Old Tom never mentioned Irene. Nor did Mrs. Arbuthnot. Nor did Gamekeeper Hockey on the Monday morning when they walked the woods. Yet their eyes mentioned her, curiously—for his chauffeur had gossiped a little; and in the end he felt glad enough to leave them, to hie him back to Town.

§ 3

In Town, that Monday night, he slept as he had always been wont to sleep, dreamlessly—but re-awoke to panic. And panic drove him to Haringford; made him drive Haringford to haste.

"Dick's drawing up the affidavit now," said Haringford. "July's out of the question. But you can rely on it's being through by November—unless, of course, they fight."

November! And to-day was the fourteenth of April. Six months more of it—and supposing she came back. Supposing she came back!

"She might try to come back this afternoon," said Masterson's panic—and, forbidding immediate return to Carlton House Terrace, drove him to Adrian Rose.

Adrian Rose talked little that afternoon; yet seemed to understand much. "Devil of a wrench," said Adrian Rose. "You'll want to go away as soon as it's over, I expect. Wish I

could come with you. I've got the travel-fever on me these days—for the first time since the War." And he added, quite casually, never dreaming the words would find any billet, "Seems silly, doesn't it, that you can't get away at once—as you could do, if the boot were on the other leg?"

After which Adrian, all the warm Jewish heart and all the keen Jewish brain of him seeking some antidote for the obvious misery, tried to turn their conversation on to politics.

Politics, however, held John only long enough for him to say, "I'm not going to stand. I've written Adamson he must find somebody else. It can't hurt the party. We're too big already. And even if I got in, I shouldn't be any use." And *he* added, equally casual, "Do you really mean that if the boot were on the other leg I shouldn't have to stay?"

"Of course not," laughed Adrian Rose. "All you'd have to do in that case would be to take some other woman to an hotel."

The words, the picture they conjured up, revolted Masterson: yet in them flickered the first semblance of a hope; and that night, alone in his empty library, he sat a full hour revolving that hope, till all the Puritan in him, and something of righteous anger, voted the thing impossible, more weakness, a pandering to fear.

Yet next morning, Wednesday, when Mary Millward told him that Tom Trevor was on the telephone and asking for an appointment, hope flickered again, though the fear was like a knife at his vitals.

"Tell Mr. Trevor I can't see him," he began; then changed the order, "No. I'd rather see him. Tell him he'd better come round at once."

So Tom Trevor came; and stuttered even more than usual, as he seated himself by the big desk.

"C-Cynthia thought I'd b-better see you," stuttered Tom Trevor. "This is a d-damn rotten b-business, John. P-people are beginning to talk. A f-fellow at the club t-told me last night you'd already f-filed your p-petition. C-can't anything be arranged? It's such a b-b-bloody thing in a f-family, is a d-divorce."

"I'm not going to take Irene back, if that's what you've come for, Tom," Masterson interrupted; speaking very quickly, as a man uncertain of his own mind.

"N-no. Of c-course not. B-but I say, John—c-couldn't s-something be done? My s-s-solicitors—J-j-jewsbury and J-j-jeavons, their n-name is—th-think they ought to s-see your s-s-solicitors. Would you m-m-mind?"

"Not in the least," answered Masterson: and once Tom

Trevor had left him, hope flickered for the third time—flickered very temptingly before his eyes.

Mary Millward brought two more messages that morning: one from Dick Haringford, "He asked me to tell you the papers would be ready by five o'clock," and one from Sir Martin Black, "*He* wants to see you at five o'clock, too. Here."

But even Mary Millward did not realize what lay behind the hesitant answer, "Sir Martin Black! Oh, all right—I suppose I'll have to see him"; though her heart did drop one tiny beat of annoyance at the quiet, "There's no violent hurry about the papers. Tell young Haringford they can wait."

For throughout these days Mary Millward's brain—reacting from that first thought-clarity—had again gone numb.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

§ 1

Mary Millward was not present at John Masterson's interview with Sir Martin Black, who came with Adamson and Beneforth, and spent a fruitless half-hour repeating, "Hang it all, man—you owe it to yourself to get in this time. And we want Percy Cobbold beaten—dash it all, man, we must have Percy Cobbold beaten—if it's only for the moral effect." But after the trio had gone she did summon up enough courage to ask, "Of course, I don't want to know your reasons for not standing. Still, it does seem a pity. No one else can win Thameside South."

"Can't they?" he answered unsmiling. "Can't they? What about Rose?"

"Then they're going to offer Major Rose the seat?"

"Yes. On my advice. They're with him now."

It angered Mary a little to think of John's being supplanted by Rose; and when, just on dinner-time, Rose came dashing round "to talk things over" and she had to go down to him in the library, she felt altogether jealous—quite certain that he was her enemy and not her friend.

"I'm afraid I don't know where Mr. Masterson is," she said. "He went out for a walk, I fancy. Would you care to wait?"

"Yes. I'll wait," answered Rose; and even in his selfish excitement remembered a Siamese proverb he had stolen for one of his plays, "A thorn to pluck out a thorn, laddie—in other words, a woman to pluck out a girl."

That proverb, while he exchanged a moment or so's small talk with this so-obviously-devoted Mary, seemed peculiarly apt to Adrian; less apt, however, when, with barely ten minutes left for dressing, his friend John came back from his walk. For John's step dragged a bit across the library carpet, and the hand he gave shook a bit, and in his eyes there quivered a light—a very queer light that Adrian Rose had seen in more than one woman's eyes, but never before in the eyes of a man.

And, "This *is* the very devil," thought Adrian Rose. "Poli-

tics must wait. I've got to find out what's happened—what's put that queer light into his eyes."

So Adrian Rose, probing very carefully throughout a long, and truth to tell rather boring, dinner, found out a good deal. John, walking, had seen Irene, " Not to speak to—she was in a taxi—with her sister." John—fairly obviously—had not liked seeing Irene, " She didn't look well. Must be a rotten thing for a woman to look forward to—divorce." And John—quite obviously—had not forgotten those casual words, " Seems silly, doesn't it, that you can't get away at once—as you could do if the boot were on the other leg ? "

Three times, indeed, did John lead conversation back to those words ; flirt with them as it were. Yet each time he concluded with the same decision, " Can't be done, of course. Can't possibly be done."

For even Rose's tact—though he, and he alone, suspected the fundamental fact, the quintessential truth of him—could not bring this man to disclose his fear. Nor was even James Haringford—despite all the knowledge gained from those various men and women who had sat on the same errand and in the same chair where his friend and client, John Masterson, sat next morning—a whit wiser than Rose.

" But *why* won't you swear the affidavit ? " asked Haringford. " What in the world's put *this* idea into your head ? I don't say the thing can't be done the other way. It *can* be done the other way. Wilfrid Jewsbury even had the audacity to tell me that they wouldn't press for alimony if it *were*. But if it is—don't ask me to have anything to do with it. And remember, you can't back out once you take *that* step. Because it's burning your boats."

" Precisely," agreed James Haringford's friend and client. " I'll remember that. It'll be burning my boats."

And by the Saturday morning John Masterson had burned his boats, burned them to the water-line. No solicitor helped him (though after the thing was done James Haringford relented sufficiently to accept Wilfrid Jewsbury's service), only a woman—a painted drab of a woman whom he picked up in the streets. She was grateful for his twenty pounds, was that painted drab of a woman—grateful for the suitcase he let her buy, and the champagne he stood her, and for the comfortable sitting-room and the somewhat less comfortable bedroom in the big railway hotel.

But she cried a little—champagne tears, one imagines—when he left her alone in that bedroom ; and, early in the morning, after he had come to her, and forced himself to sit on the edge of

her bed in his pyjamas, and rung for tea, and made himself accomplish all that nauseating farce which men perform for the benefit of a valet, a chambermaid, and a Lord Justice of England, (and tipped both the valet and the chambermaid, so that there might be no doubt of justice's being eventually done) she said to him, picking at the counterpane with her square-nailed fingers while she spoke :

" You give me the willies, old dear. I'm 'uman, I am. Though I 'ave taken your twenty Bradburys. And you ain't. It isn't 'uman to 'ate women. Not the way you do."

So he gave her another twenty pounds, first because of her " willies " ; and secondly because, among the words she had spoken, one appealed to him as most amazingly true.

Human or inhuman, he did hate women. The very acts of demanding his bill from the girl at the office, of watching the girl receipt it, of writing his letter in the empty hotel reading-room, of enclosing the receipted bill with his letter and registering it to Cynthia's address, seemed to prove his hatred—to demonstrate that hatred might cast out fear.

But though this hatred cast the queer light which had roused Adrian's suspicion from Masterson's eyes—it might not cast fear from him, nor yet his wanting of his wife.

And now panic drove him again—lashed him to a frantic haste. Politics were out of his way. One telegram to an astonished Withers, " Come London at once " ; one sentence, " I'm going to have a look at a hospital I'm building in Abyssinia—you'll have to do your best with the gee-gees till I get back," finished off the business of his racing-stable. A joint power of attorney to Haringford and Carfax disposed of finance. Mrs. Arbuthnot had her instructions about Mastersleigh by letter ; Euphemia her consolation about Carlton House Terrace by word of mouth.

" There's nothing for you to worry about, Aunt," ran that consolation. " This house isn't going to be shut up. And Miss Millward will be given funds to run it as long as I'm away."

And to Euphemia—mainly because, after being told how he had arranged his divorce, she insisted upon knowing, " What other idiocies he proposed committing ? "—John Masterson confided. " She's to keep her settlements, of course, and the jewellery, and her two cars."

At which confidences Euphemia—needless to say—sniffed.

§ 2

But Mary Millward—except for business ones—received no confidences whatsoever. Humblestone Street was to be her principal job, and Archer's Rents, and the other "charity buildings." Aubreystone would help her. She could write if she felt it "really necessary." Though letters might not be forarded; and anyway he'd rather not hear.

"You mean to be away a long time, then?" she asked, her voice trembling a little despite all her self-control.

"Yes. After I've been to Addis, I'm going on."

She wanted to ask him where "on" might be; wanted to ask him a thousand questions; and, above all, the two, "You're not going away forever? You do mean, eventually, to come back?" But his eyes forbade; and as the swift days whirled by, that ache whose misery is as the misery of unborn children, turned to a still-born dead-weight under her either breast. She felt that John was already lost to her, that he hated her; found it unbearable that he should hate her; yet realized how a man may hate all women for the sake of the one; realized that he trusted her; tried to console herself with that trusting; yet came to no consolation—and to no foreknowledge of any future that might be.

Yet even so her love kept selfless—selfless and very strong.

Only his future mattered—not her own. He must go where he would; wander as he would; do what he would; come back when he would—or not come back to her at all. All such things were immaterial—material only that he should win through his Gethsemane; save his soul alive.

Also, when the dead-weight hung heaviest, Mary Millward used to tell herself—as so many another woman—that it didn't hurt.

Towards the end, however, the dead-weight lifted, and she grew conscious of pain.

Little things, strangely, seemed to pain her more than the big. A look John gave a child, for instance, on the one and only occasion when he inspected the completion of Humblestone Street; and Menelik's grin when he caught sight of the steamer "tickutts" in her office; and the label "Wanted on voyage" on one of John's old dunny-bags, and paying the bills for his cartridges, for his camp-equipment, for his stores—these things hurt more, far more than the actual apprehension of his going. And so did a letter he dictated to Frankie Farrar; and another letter—or, rather, the envelope of it—she saw him address in his own hand to Frankie Farrar's wife.

And towards the end, she would catch herself thinking forward

to the after-days, to the days when John had won through his Gethsemane. For of course John would win through his Gethsemane, would save his soul alive. Because he was altogether too fine a man, and too strong a man, and too gentle a man, and too clean a man, and too useful a man, to let any woman—leave alone a worthless one—shipwreck his whole life. But thinking forward, somehow or other, merely made the pain of little things worse.

Yet on the final day of all, only the big thing pained—the fact of his actual going. She had learned of his boat-burning by then ; but bringing her letters for the last time to his big desk, watching for the last time while he signed her letters, hearing, almost for the last time, the new and terrible politeness of his voice, her heart could find no room for resentment against Irene.

Her heart was breaking—breaking. And he—he didn't care. She was less to him than Menelik—than the brown man who would go with him across the sea. The brown man would give him personal service—tend his clothes, tend his bodily comforts, tend him if he were ill. She could only tend his property—his houses and his money, the things he didn't really care for, the things impersonal that were no part of him. And though, one day, he might thank her for that tending, he would thank her only as he might thank Belton or some other of his menials—not from his heart, because his heart still beat for the other woman, for the woman who had betrayed him with his friend.

Still—it didn't count, to-day, that the other woman should profit by her betrayal of him. It didn't even count that John himself should pay the penalty of that other woman's shame. No! To-day nothing—nothing in all the world counted, except *her* penalty, the penalty demanded by her love of John.

Because that penalty was silence—silence and to let him go.

She had to let him go, had to keep silence though her heart did break. And he was going now—now at this very instant. One more letter—Rose's, wishing him luck in the election—to sign : five minutes with Euphemia. And then? And then?

He tried to say good-bye to her in the sanctum, but she would not let him. Alone, should their hands meet, she might weaken ; let him see. "No," she stammered, "no. I'll come down to say good-bye to you. I'll be in the hall."

Her five minutes in the hall were agony—blood-agony—an agony of dancing scarlet before her eyes. She had not dreamed she loved him thus—body as well as soul, mind, heart, brain, all of her. She had not dreamed that she could suffer thus—she who was built only for the one love—when the one love went away.

Why must he go so casually, so carelessly? Couldn't he see the agony in her? Didn't he know how it hurt her to stand there, unregarded, while he tightened the strap of a gun-case, while he spoke with Menelik, with Belton, with Rogers who would motor him away?

No. He saw nothing, knew nothing, of *her* love. Man-like, he only knew, only saw his own. And his love was for that other woman, for the worthless one. He made no secret of that love—his very going confessed it. Only *her* love must remain secret—forever secret in her breast.

He had done with the gun-case now; was regarding her; was coming towards her, offering his hand. She managed to take his hand; managed to say, "Good-bye, Mr. Masterson. I'll do my best to look after things while you're away"; managed to hear his, "I'm sure you will, Miss Millward—I'm sure that everything will be quite safe with you"; managed that her hand should not fasten on his—and so lost him, lost him from the touch of her hands, from the sight of her eyes.

Yet Mary's heart followed John Masterson—even as his want of another woman followed him—across the sea.

§ 3

For always, even across the sea, his Wanting of Irene followed John Masterson; and with his Wanting, the Fear. These were his travelling-companions—and he might not rid himself of them. At Marseilles they were with him, and through the Straits of Italian Messina. Banjoes, tinkling of home, carried their voices to him across the waters of Port Said. They lurked in the lights of Ismailia, lurked in the heat-hazes among the sand-dunes of the Canal. Off Perim he was aware of them; and in barren Aden; and beyond Aden, where a man changes ship to watch the last of the sun flame green behind the league-long smoke-plume ere she makes Djibouti.

There was a woman on that French ship to Djibouti—and she, too, saw something of the hatred towards all women which flickered in this man's eyes. "He is not for us," said that woman in her own vernacular. "He is a little mad—as the English do go a little mad after passion. And I think that he will kill many lions." But the French men liked him well enough.

Fear waned a little at Djibouti; but the wanting haunted his night at the new hotel; and beyond Djibouti, all across the wastelands to Daounlé, he would have sold all freedom for a word from Irene's lips. And beyond Daounlé, as they climbed and

climbed the crags for Dirre Daoua, fear strengthened again, was like a whip across his mind.

Next morning's sun rose ere he and Menelik left Dirre Daoua, and all the mountains that guard Abyssinia were rose-lilac beyond the windows of his climbing train. Mount Afdam reared its head for him, and Assabot Mountain, and the air of the Entoto seemed almost in his nostrils as Hawash suspension bridge went crawling under his doubtful wheels. Yet the mountain-heads spoke only one message to him, and, under every wheel, ran fear.

By day, fear dwelt in all the gorges ; and at night in the rest house below.

Nor did even his last day's journey bring any surcease from his fearing ; though, all the high way to Addis, the sun blazed like a meteor, and *chammaed* riflemen who had known him of yore saluted, and naked children shrieked him welcome, and the hibiscus-hedges at the wayside stations were red as a Dankali's hair.

Many welcomed him in Addis ; and Ras Tafari gave a banquet for him—a great banquet at which ten thousand of his soldiery tore red meat upon the ground. Ras Tafari, too—the lion's mane round his neck—opened his hospital for him ; and dubbed him Dejazmach, a General in Judah, when the opening was done.

Frankie Farrar laughed after that formal dubbing, and Mrs. Frankie decreed a special dinner for him—the best the Legation could provide. But talk did not sparkle at that dinner ; and watching her " strong silent man," the sense of humour in Mrs. Frankie decided him a little like " Galla Boy," the white marabout, when he moped upon his perch.

" This time, it *is* a woman," thought Mrs. Frankie—that flash of humour over. But her Frankie couldn't find out anything definite about the woman, though he sat up half the night while she listened to the Willesden chairs creaking, and the sputter of the matches at their pipe-bowls, and a gray hawk-moth thudding against the roof-plaster, and winged ant after winged ant sputtering out its life-fluid above the chimney of the lamp.

" Don't *you* ask him any questions," commanded Frankie Farrar, returning from that long palaver. " He nearly bit my head off when I wanted him to tell me why he hadn't brought his wife."

For fear and want were still with Masterson ; and after he had had audience with Zauditu, and taken gifts from Zauditu, he went his way from Addis, leading only a small *safari*, not rejoicing in that freedom which money gives a man, but sorrowful, seeking another freedom, the freedom which is never granted —a man's freedom from a man's desires.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

§ 1

SOUTH of Djiren, which lies south-west from Addis, beyond Guma and the Gourage country and the Kafa mountains, the Omo River loses itself in that lake, big as five English shires, which is called Rudolph.

It took John Masterson, travelling circuitously, a good three months to make the junction of the Omo River and Lake Rudolph; and gaunt camp-followers of his *safari*, drifting thence to their homes on Shala or in dusty Ladu, fill all those three months with tales of a mighty hunting.

Shala and Ladu, by the way, still beg leave to doubt some of those tales. "That the red Dejazmach slays his elephant from the ground," say Shala and Ladu, "and slays him so close that he must spring from under lest the great head fall on him, is perhaps credible. But that he kills him his lion with the spear after the old manner—this thing we will not believe of any *Frangi*. No more than we will believe that he strangles the leopard with his naked hands."

The camp-followers exaggerated, of course. Yet in substance, their tales were true. One lion—and a wounded one at that—Masterson did kill with the spear; because a cartridge jammed in the magazine of his repeating rifle, and the spear happened to be the only weapon that the boy who should have handed him his .577 Express thought of leaving behind him in his flight. And one bull elephant, *must*-mad in its mating season, certainly did drop—shot clean through mouth to brain as the trunk lifted between the charging tushes—almost within a hand's breadth of his naked knee. The leopard, also, though not killed with the actual hand, undoubtedly received its quietus from a straight-driven knife.

But the camp-followers' peroration, "Believe or believe not, red man, or no red man, we tell thee that this *Frangi* has no fear," is sheer apocrypha. Because all the way from Addis Ababa to the northern fringes of Lake Rudolph, relics of that

fear which had harried John Masterson from England were present in his mind—nor could his body rid itself of its last desire

That desire, perhaps, explains most of his killing; explains, with no perhaps about it, why he could not sleep after his kill; why, after the longest jungle-day, he would lie wakeful, hearing the tree-frogs croak, and the great cats snarl as they came down to drink at the water-pools; why, even thereafter, he slept but dreamfully, glad enough when the first light peeped through the tent-flaps and the goreza monkeys, chattering among their fig-clusters, gave their first warning of the Ethiopian dawn. Thus, may be, Adam slept after losing Lilith, before the Lord gave him Eve.

Anyway, John Masterson kept on dreaming of *his* Lilith; and on the first night he pitched camp by the waters of Rudolph, which is the end of Abyssinia, came the worst dream of all. In that dream it appeared that he had forgiven Irene, taken her back, and brought her here. Irene, naked, had gone down to bathe in the lake. She called to him; and going to her he saw that she had not been able to cleanse her body in the waters of the lake; and that her body was no longer white, but mottled as the bodies of the orchids which had swept across his face that day.

Whereupon he struck camp; and travelled, killing as he went, a seven days' journey along the eastern coast of Lake Rudolph. But each of those nights, he dreamed the same dream; and on the night before he made Loiyengelani, his dream shewed him two bodies—a man's body and a woman's—his own and Irene's—each uncleansable in any water—and each mottled as those same orchids which had swept across his face.

At Loiyengelani, however—possibly because of a certain woman-hating subaltern who abode there from choice with a ragged platoon of God-knows-what black infantry, and a nondescript dog, and a banjolele that lacked two strings, and several cases of the kind of whiskey which tastes even as well just after as just before sleep—Masterson's dream left him. The banjolele he found a little difficult to bear; but the subaltern and his Lokkobb ghillie shewed him how to bait a line for the baggora, which is the forty-pound perch of the Blue Nile; and since neither the white man nor the brown was given to much talking, he stayed at Loiyengelani for the best part of a week.

There, too, as a relief from the banjolele, on a very hot night while he and the subaltern were sitting outside their hut, Menelik, all savage again in his travel-stained *chamma*, demanded audience:

and having beaten about every bush between them and Addis, came finally to his point.

" I have the home-fever," announced Menelik. " Thanks to the Ras' money, I am rich ; and being rich it behoves me to find a new wife. Let my Ras, therefore, send me back, with such letters as are necessary, to my own place, to the City of the New Flower."

" As thou wilt," said Masterson. But he sent no letters back to Addis Ababa ; nor, watching Menelik and three other of the Abyssinians file out of Loiyengelani next morning, did he feel any particular regret.

" Faithful chap," he told the subaltern. " And a good batman. But on the whole, I'd just as soon that he should go."

§ 2

The subaltern, asking no question, obtained no answer. He had his own troubles, you see, and would not have been in the least interested to learn that, all through the months since Masterson had left England, Menelik's eyes, and Menelik's manner of speech (though no actual word spoken by him), and the very knife he used for skinning kudus, had been too much reminder of certain happenings on a storm-tossed boat and a certain impulse which might have led an unbalanced mind to murder.

" None of my business," thought that subaltern ; and made no protest when Masterson announced his intention of " moving on."

Still, the subaltern was quite willing to take over the three remaining horses ; and, having assisted in a chaffer for camels with some Ogaden Somali, helped Masterson bring his last baggora to the gaff, while the Lokkobb ghillie attended to the filling of his water-sacks. The sacks, one may mention, were infinitely more important than the baggora. Because, beyond Loiyengelani and the big shoulder of Kulal Mountain, the traveller who seeks Marsabit must carry all the water he can ; there being no fishes but only a good pinch of salt in the one muddy hole at Laipera.

Masterson made bad travelling to Marsabit ; leaving several of the Somalis' camels among the thorn scrub on the way. But there, under the trees by the blue crater-lakes, the last of his fears dropped from him ; and it is possible that he would have remained on—Marsabit possesses no resident English, because even English subalterns die in the rains, only mountains and the blue water, and a few camel-farmers, and the elephants whose

ears flap like great birds as the *safari* approaches across the plain —had it not been for a certain Englishwoman who came thither out of the Kenya country to the south.

An armed escort accompanied that Englishwoman, and a cinema operator. Also, she was talkative, and used a perfume which smelt a little like violets and lilies, and threatened, over an excellent tiffin, to put Masterson in her book. So—dreamful no longer but still conscious that he wanted Irene—John Masterson fled from Marsabit, and made his way south-east across that other desert which the Swahili call, " Dida Gulgullo," or " The Place where Men Die."

Two of Masterson's men did die in Dida Gulgullo. He killed them himself, very cleanly, with the revolver ; and by so doing (for they were mutineers, and mad ones at that, slashing his water-sacks) saved the lives of many, including a round dozen of the original porters who had accompanied him out of Addis. Moreover, it may be added here—and perhaps some psycho-analyst will explain it for us—that having killed man for justice's sake, Masterson's " mighty hunting " came to an abrupt full stop, and after he had won down through Dida Gulgullo into the Maheran country, he shot no more animals, except for safety or that his porters might eat.

But though his " mighty hunting " had come to an end, and though he had at last cast out fear, our friend had still not altogether cast out his desire ; and in the Maheran country—the bulk of his Abyssinians begging that they should be allowed to return and the men from Marsabit insisting—he collected a new *safari* of the Garre tribe, who are half Boran and half Somali ; and after this, his trail blurs across the least known wastes of Eastern Africa.

§ 3

Some of John Masterson's Garre boys, returning to Maheran, stated that they had left him at the edge of the Lorian Swamp : others that he had taken boat to the South. Eil Wak, he certainly visited ; and Serenli on the river. But he never crossed the Kenya frontier ; and the Italians have no record of him ; nor did the wireless stations signal his passage across the borders of Jubaland.

So that obviously he circled North : as is borne out by the fact that, when the trail clears again, we find him making his last mile across a certain desert of white sand, very blinding to the naked eye, and into certain breast-high jungle-grass across which, as great and little ships and submarines across the sea,

come the elephant-folk and the leopard-folk and the lion-folk, and the deer-folk these follow, into that place of tarn and stream and trees and granite cliffs, which the outliers of southern Abyssinia call, " Motee Mamotee " or " Sanctuary which is decreed."

It took John Masterson and his handful of men (there were only two Abyssinians left by now ; and one of these—a Falasha boy, whom our friend had nicknamed, because of his Hebraic appearance, Adrian—sent up some weird prayer when they first caught sight of those low cliffs battlemented in granite against the sapphire of the sky) a full five days' journey to reach Motee Mamotee.

But even the approximate location of this place is not for print. Because as yet there are neither game-laws nor game-reserves in Abyssinia ; and hither come not only all those beasts whom the brown man's rifles drive down from the North, but many of those whom the white man's rifle drives up from the South ; these last—so Masterson believes—making their way up that river which has its double sources by Ginir and Gorobure in the Arussi country.

Also, though John Masterson (and one other white man) can find this place again when they will, even Masterson himself cannot pin its exact latitude and longitude to the map. Because the November rains were over when he forded a nameless stream to pitch his camp on a certain ledge of turf and tree-boles ; and the heat-shimmer, turning misty above the elephant-grass, baffled a whole week's effort (he had brought no instruments except an obsolete Mark IV. Army Prismatic Compass) at survey.

And after that first week, to be quite frank, John Masterson lost all interest in his compass-work.

For in this place " Sanctuary," there came to him, as comes eventually to all those who are strong enough to remove themselves, the white magic of self-sufficiency, and with it a complete cleansing of that desire which had originally driven him from the haunts of men.

Race by race, the few men he had brought with him—first the Garre, then the Somali, and then the Falasha-boy, most chattersome of all, with his fellow-Abyssinian—went their separate ways : till soon there remained to him only three nearly dumb Waiyatmezi porters ; and a few natives of the place, nondescript men, and shy almost as the beasts themselves, who dwelt with their womenfolk under crude reed-thatches by the banks of the stream.

Masterson, before he lost interest in such things, used to

wonder how these shy tribesmen had first come to Motee, deciding alternately that they were refugees from the disembowelling border-warfare which still flickered up and down the Sidamo country, or mere migrators in search of food from the bad lands towards Bagheri; and in quest of this knowledge he struck up a kind of friendship with the only member of the tribe who spoke words he could understand: one Koro by name, a lusty chocolate-skinned fellow, who served him for guide.

Inland among the granite-cliffs of Motee Mamotee (Koro, for some strange reason, always called the granite-cliffs "land" and the elephant-grass through which Masterson had come, "big water") were many steep gorges, and many deep ravines. Orchids grew in these ravines; and through them, in and out among the liana ropes that coiled from trunk to trunk of huge trees whose name even Masterson did not know, flashed such a multitude of birds and such a multitude of butterflies, that all the sun-flecked shadows seemed shot and inter-shot with kingfisher colours and hammerhead colours and dove colours and pigeon colours and the green and red and orange colours of the jungle parrots, and the deep electric blue of the giant swallowtails whose pupae hung in chocolate-brown clusters from the purple-brown faces of the rock.

And in the gorges were many waterfalls, plashing to lotus-bordered pools, wherein a trout-like fish spawned, and dragon-flies bred, and water-beetles, and a queer little water-spider, entirely new to Masterson, something like a praying mantis and something like a miniature man. And farther inland still, beyond other pools—where the horned ibis came to fish, and the secretary-birds, and the flamingoes, and an occasional hawk-visitor from the plain-lands to the North—you came on a straight mile of cactus-hedged pathway which might have been dynamite-blasted through the rock.

Beyond this path—according to Masterson's belief—lies the jungle sanctuary of the greater beasts. But he never hacked his way into that jungle; and though he heard elephants trumpeting there, and lions roaring, and the grunts of the rhino, and that particular snarl which means that the great cats are fighting over their kill, he could reach no decision as to whether the greater beasts came to sanctuary by the cactus-bordered path-way (which was almost spoorless) or by some other path known only to themselves.

For this also—as his compass-work and his speculating about Koro's tribe—soon lost interest for him; and after his first month in Motee Mamotee, he spent all of his days, except

the cool hours when he could take exercise, on the grass ledge where he had pitched his original camp; until for first fruit of the white magic of self-sufficiency, his thoughts—having arranged many things in their due perspective—turned first inwards, and then outwards again, allowing him to contemplate, very gingerly, almost as a savage might contemplate the sea, both the future and the past.

§ 4

Yet once it had led John Masterson thus far, the white magic failed; and a listlessness of thought, though not of body, succeeded it. He had no wish—at this point in his self-sufficiency—to return to England; and somewhere about the end of his second month in Sanctuary (a month after Christmas he would have known it, had he not lost count of time), he fell prey to that temptation which has been the bane of half the world's half-baked philosophers, and is summed by one in that cunning phrase, "Natural Man."

"Be a natural man," whispered that temptation. "Cut loose from civilization altogether. It's easy enough."

And that temptation happened to be at its strongest on a certain very gorgeous evening when, in the brief half-hour of the twilight, Koro wandered up, fishing-tackle in hand, from the river-bank, and squatted himself pensive on the waterproof canvas by John Masterson's one rhoorkee chair.

"Greeting," grunted Koro. "I bring fishes."

"I thank thee for the fishes."

"Also, I bring a question."

"What question?"

"How long dost thou stay?"

"Who knows?"

"But a long while?"

"It may be—a long while."

"Then if thou stayest"—Koro spoke quickly, his eyes now on Masterson's impassive face, now on the tent behind him—"thou wilt need a woman. I, for my part, need *abougedid*, of which thou still hast two bales. Therefore I bring my youngest. Though the elder is thine shouldst thou prefer."

Whereupon Koro, having no more skill at words, whistled down into the shadows below the ledge, up out of which, shyly, and naked as Koro's wife made her, there stepped a girl.

The girl had long fuzzy hair; her thick lips curled back from big square teeth; her eyes goggled a little; and her colour was Koro's own dark chocolate. But her young body possessed

all those curves and all that grace which are only given to the unspoiled savage: so that, looking on her where she stood before him in the fast-gathering twilight, it took John Masterson a good five minutes before he said, " The cotton is thine, Koro. But as for me, I need her not."

§ 5

Whereafter, not in any sudden revelation, but gradually, as such things happen to the not over-imaginative, all sorts and kinds of truths began to make themselves plain to our friend's mind. Till, by the end of his third month in Motee Mamotee, that far-reaching sense of personal responsibility which is true civilization, drove the last listlessness from his thoughts; and he grew contemplative once more, not for himself this time, but for the land whence he had come.

One day, perhaps, the full tale of that contemplation will be written. But the place for it is not here. Here need only be written how, being the man he was and essentially of his own period (a commonsense rather than an Utopian thinker), he refused to be misled by the windy ideals of a futile internationalism; re-finding his faith in his own people, and pinning his beliefs for them to the dourest, starkest, least palatable of all the truths: That struggle is the essential law of all life—but that civilized life can only be made tolerable when those whom chance or their own ability lift above the struggle, stoop down to comfort and to strengthen and to uplift (but never further to weaken) the weak.

You can describe him as a Christian patriot, if you like—though he only prayed once (to be forgiven his bitterness against his father) in the whole time he spent at Motee Mamotee. And if you are of a cynical turn (in which case you yourself might do a little praying) you can say that his months in sanctuary only brought him back to the exact same frame of mind in which you saw him when he originally left Addis Ababa; that all contemplation which does not result in action is sheer sterility; and that he was a narrow thinker because he only thought for his own race—adding as a final cynicism, " When it's all said and done, why devote so much time to narrating this one man's relations with Irene—seeing that Irene only provided an interlude during which his main and very laudable desire to serve his fellow-creatures got tangled up with another desire, not quite so laudable but very much more common, the fundamental desire of Sex? "

But if you come only to these conclusions you will be fighting shy—as every cynic, and all that horde of psycho-medico-lego-sociological analysts who imagine that human beings are to be classified under labels, always have fought shy—of that incalculable factor, Romance.

For without romance the soul expires, even as bodies expire in Dida Gulgullo: and so to John Masterson, thinking much of England, there return, subconsciously perhaps, born only of the poetry in him and of those clouds that hang their rose-pink, rose-gold banners in the dawn-blue of Eastern Africa, some tattered fragments of a dream—of that earliest, most fragrant, most boyish dream which haunted him on the day, just two years ago now, when he first re-made acquaintance with his hill of escape beyond the second postern-gate of Mastersleigh Towers.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

§ 1

NEVERTHELESS you must not imagine that any fragment, howsoever tattered, of that long-ago dream is influencing our friend as he stands to watch the final approach of the strange *safari*.

At the moment, you see—and the moment is very late afternoon—his whole mind is absorbed with purely selfish considerations. Other *safaris*, it is true, have been visible from time to time across the mist-shimmer on the elephant-grass. But this is the first one which has actually approached, actually threatened Motee Mamotee. And, taking things all round, he resents this threat; has been resenting it ever since yesterday's observation made the *safari's* goal clear.

John Masterson admits to himself that he has no definite reason for this resentment. The inner game-sanctuary is hardly likely to be discovered by casual explorers; and it is already three weeks since he determined (his last pipeful of tobacco clinching the determination) to start for England before the April rains. So that this expedition—it looks rather like a white man's, though he can't distinguish either clothes or faces because of the mist-shimmer—may prove a decided godsend to his plans.

Still, there the resentment is. He doesn't relish even the risk of another man—white *or* brown—discovering the inner game-sanctuary of Motee Mamotee. And he doesn't relish, either, the feeling that this expedition may *bustle* him into returning home. Surely another week of this pleasant loneliness can't do any harm? Surely his home responsibilities, having waited so long for him, can wait a while longer—possibly even till after April? So, taking things all round, let this strange *safari* go hang!

The long snaky line of porters is fairly close by now, not five miles away from the ledge where he has pitched his tent, and within three of the gum-trees at the ford. But twilight is falling

fast ; and since his glasses still give no clear picture of the rider at the head of the line, it is more than possible that the rider hasn't seen *him*. In which case—his tent being invisible behind trees—it is just possible that the strangers will camp at the ford ; and, striking camp next day, follow the stream south, without bothering to investigate the cliffs. A very comfortable conclusion, on which John Masterson, twilight having fallen, retires to his tent!

It seems a bit lonely in his tent—and, honestly, he *would* like a smoke. The noise of camp-making, too—this reaches him, very clearly, some half an hour later, as he is eating tough dik-dik flesh badly cooked by one of the Waiyatmezis—brings vague temptations. A little home-news and a gossip with a white man—if there really is a white man in the camp—wouldn't be half bad. One might even borrow a porter or two, and a decent cook. Still, there may not be any white man in the camp. And anyway, he, John Masterson, has no intention—no intention whatsoever—of going down to the ford.

Supposing, though, that the boot is on the other leg? Supposing that the white rider—by now, he feels tolerably certain that the rider he saw *was* white—learns about his presence from Koro (unlikely, of course, but still just possible) and comes up here. "In that case," decides John Masterson, "I really ought to try and make myself a bit more presentable."

The decision, thinking it over, seems a trifle absurd: but eventually—and here it is just possible that his recollection of the lady-explorer at Marsabit is a factor—he fumbles in the pocket of his shorts ; and, having hauled out his tinder-lighter (matches ran out months before tobacco) kindles a dry leaf, and from it his penultimate candle: by the steady flame of which he proceeds, first to inspect his face in the mirror hanging from the tent-pole, then to shave, a duty which has been delayed for two days, and finally to attire himself in the one decent suit of white duck and the one decent pair of boots remaining in his uniform-case. Whereafter, he blows out the candle, leaves the tent, and sits down in his rhoorkee chair to await events.

The moon is just rising behind the granite battlements. Fire-flies flash in the gloom. Somewhere a baboon is barking. Somewhere elands are on the move. Out of the trees, a night-bird calls to its mate. And below—not twenty minutes away for a good runner—are the camp-noises. Rather tempting, those camp-noises! Very tempting! Very tempting indeed!

"We've just had supper," say the camp-noises. "We're having our smoke, our gossip, a peg or so before we turn in. But

don't *you* bother about *us*. If we want you, we'll come up to-morrow."

To-morrow!

Five more minutes—hang it, whatever kind of men they are, they'll have *something* to smoke—make to-morrow a joke; ten make it an eternity; and fifteen . . . well, fifteen of those minutes, not to prolong the agony, see our friend, John Masterson so utterly certain he can't stand another second's loneliness that the rhoorkee chair turns a complete somersault behind him as he starts for the ford.

The first mile to the ford is tricky going, especially in unaccustomed boots over the rock. But John Masterson does it well under Koro's record; and if, over the second mile—grass, with the moonlight turning everything to silver and the camp-noises louder than the stream-noises in his ears—Koro might have beaten him, it would have only been on account of the song.

The song, you see, stops him twice: not because it is the song men sing in Addis, the song that begins:

> "In the City of the New Flower
> I found me a flower.
> And I conquered me that flower.
> As I conquered me the City";

but because of its chorus—of that chorus which goes wailing as a woman wails to the thrum of the Ethiopian lyre:

> "Sing of the New Flower, sing of the New Flower,
> For Old Flowers wither and the New is full-blown."

"Full-blown!" wails that Ethiopian music as John Masterson comes to the ford. Then the last wail of it dies on the Ethiopian night; and to silence he crosses the stream.

§ 2

Flat stones lead across the shallowest of the stream; and here the granite battlements of Motee Mamotee block the moonlight: so that all John Masterson can see, while his feet tread the fording stones, are steep shadows leading to a black wall of foliage, and, above the foliage, the gumtree-tops outlined feathery against the stars. Then he comes up from the ford; and sees, close ahead of him, this side of the black foliage-wall, the picture shewn by the fire.

The fire has burnt low; yet the red radiance of it suffices to shew him the darkened tents, and the table, and the

Willesden canvas chairs. These objects—this commonplace equipment of a white man's camp—bring the Adam's apple to his throat. But is it these objects? Isn't it the sight of one of his own kind—sitting there—sitting absolutely still within six feet of the red fire—sitting and smoking—smoking a cigar just as Adrian used to smoke his cigar—in the old days at Carlton House Terrace?

But, damn it, it can't be Adrian?

And now, John Masterson hesitates; makes to turn back. His heart is thumping—dancing a mad fandango under his ribs. It *isn't* Adrian. It's a stranger. And he doesn't want strangers. He wants his friend. His one and only friend. If only he weren't so hungry for tobacco. And this stranger really is smoking the most glorious tobacco—a perfect dream of a cigar.

So at last—his nostrils twitching—our friend pulls himself together; and comes forward to the fire.

"Dejazmach Masterson, I believe," says the man by the fire; and rising goes on, quickly, because after all he hasn't come all this way to plagiarize Mr. Stanley or to display his recently acquired if scanty knowledge of Amharic, "I thought you'd come down from your eyrie, John, if only I sat still."

"Then it *is* Adrian?"

"Who else?"

John Masterson does not "lift his cap slightly" as Dr. Livingstone did on a similar occasion, primarily because John Masterson doesn't happen to be wearing anything on his head. Neither does he say, "I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you." But he does have to draw half-a-dozen very catchy breaths before he can grasp Adrian by the hand; and his deep voice is certainly higher than Adrian remembers it as he says, "Old man, I haven't had a smoke since I can remember, so for the Lord's sake give me one of those cigars."

Also, once he has been given his cigar, it takes him various minutes before he can ask—slowly, because the white magic of solitude and self-sufficiency has the disadvantage of making a man somewhat halting in self-expression, "Explain, please, Adrian! If you knew I was here, why didn't you signal from the plain? A shaving mirror would have done it. And why didn't you come up?"

"Because," says Adrian; and he too speaks very slowly, as a practised orator may speak when his whole oration hangs on its final word, "I couldn't be absolutely certain, either from what Menelik told us in Addis Ababa or from that Jewish-looking boy of yours—a Falasha I believe he calls himself, and really, the

nickname you gave him isn't a compliment—whom we picked up at Loiyengelani to guide us here, whether you"—and now Adrian Rose makes the most purposeful hesitation of his life—"were absolutely cured."

So the final word is out; and the two friends stare at one another as well as they can for the darkness, till John Masterson says, "If I hadn't been, I shouldn't have come down."

"Does that mean you've forgiven?"

"It means I understand, and that I'm sorry for her."

"And"—here, Adrian hesitates again—"him?"

"I'm sorry for him, too, in a way."

"She's married again—in case it interests you."

"It doesn't. At least not much. To him?"

"No. To a mere boy."

"Pity. What's *he* doing?"

"Nothing in particular."

"And Ivor?"

"I found him a job. He's not doing too badly."

"Decent of you, Adrian. And my aunt?"

"Still kicking."

"Good."

And after these questions Masterson, still a bit uncertain in his speech, asks others. Did Adrian win Thameside South? He did—with a five hundred majority. Good for Adrian. And how long has it taken Adrian to get here? Only twelve weeks. Pretty swift travelling, that. Worse countries than Abyssinia, eh? But how about home?

"Home's only so-so," says Adrian. "But we'll pull through before we've done. The Empire's a stouter job than most people think it, as I said at the dinner my constituents gave us just before we started out."

But at that, John Masterson, at last noticing Adrian's purposeful plurals, cuts in.

"Why do you keep on saying 'us'? Aren't you alone?"

"Not exactly," admits Adrian—chuckling to himself, just once, as he looks away at the fire. "Not exactly alone, John. As it happens, Isobel's with me. I wonder if you'd care to see Isobel. Or shall we keep Isobel till to-morrow morning? Just as you like, of course. By the way, she's got a little surprise——"

"Surprise," begins John Masterson; and as he makes no further protest, Adrian (not so unlike Koro) whistles across the gloom.

§ 3

The whistle—Adrian, you see, has stage-managed the scene with his usual eye for a dramatic effect—should have produced a light. But no light shines from the tents behind the two friends as Adrian's Isobel hears that whistle : because, on account of the woman who is with Adrian's Isobel, she simply dare not attempt such a complicated business as lighting a lamp.

Not that the woman with Adrian's Isobel is uttering any verbal protest. She isn't. Not that she is really struggling against the pressure of Isobel's hand on her arm. She isn't. It isn't a question of struggle at all. It's just a question of Isobel's knowing—as Adrian should have known—that if she does light that lamp she will never—positively never—get the woman out of the tent.

So the only thing that Isobel does, is to part the tent-flaps with her free hand, and whisper, "Come on, Mary ! You've done three thousand miles to get to him. And now you're funking the last ten yards."

"I—I'm not funking."

"Then—come on."

Mary Millward obeys ; but she *does* funk those last ten yards —funks them more than she has funked anything in life, not omitting her answer to Adrian's four-month-old questions, "Are you in love with him ? And if you are, what *is* your duty ? To stay here and look after his rotten accounts—or come with us and help to persuade him it's *his* duty to come home ?"

Mary's knees are trembling a little ; and there is a mist—a funny kind of wet mist—before her blue eyes. But Isobel's hand helps, and her own will-power, and an old saying of Handsome Jack's, "Slow to trouble—quick to joy" ; and before she knows quite how it has all happened, the last ten yards of that three-thousand-mile journey are behind her, and she is standing before John.

John recognizes her instantly—for, to help out Adrian's stagecraft, the African moon has now topped the highest point of Motee Mamotee and the whole clearing under the gum-trees is flooded with silver light. John holds out his hand ; says something—something which sounds like, "Miss Millward, by all that's wonderful. So this is your little surprise, Isobel. Little surprise, indeed ! Miss Millward—is it really you ?" But, though Mary takes John's hand, she does not hear the actual words John says ; any more than she can see much of him, because of the funny mist before her eyes.

And after that—this, Adrian *has* foreseen—both of them go completely dumb : so that, as the four seat themselves, husband and wife have a pretty hard job to make any sort of talk. However—thanks to that blessed moon, and a flying-fox or so, and various other completely natural circumstances in which Isobel manages a fevered interest—they do keep up some sort of talk until having stared at one another for a good five minutes from widely separated chairs, John and his Mary recover enough self-possession to join in.

Neither John nor Mary, of course—particularly the latter—do much to brighten the connubial duologue; because, at best, neither of them can be described as a brilliant conversationalist; and to-night—well, to-night, as Adrian phrases it to himself, "Life's caught them by the throat." So—the first connubial objective being now attained—less than a quarter of an hour more sees Isobel rising from her chair.

" Time for all good women to be in bed, Mary," says Isobel. " We'll see you in the morning, John. Come over to breakfast, won't you ? Only don't come *too* early. Because neither Adrian nor I are early risers—even when we're out here."

" Clever touch, that ! " thinks Adrian ; and adds, as the two women drift away, arm-in-arm (and only Isobel knows how much one of those arms is shaking), a touch of his own.

" You'd be surprised," adds Adrian, " to know what a devil of a job I had to make her come."

John says, " Really " ; but Adrian knows that he has scarcely heard. At the moment he is mainly seeing—seeing the light go up behind the wall of the tent. And John watches that light for a long time—so long, indeed, that his continued silence finally makes Adrian yawn.

" Think I'll be turning in, too," yawns Adrian—and chuckles again to see how his words startle John.

" Sorry," says John, " sorry. Mustn't keep you up. Be down again in the morning. Be going now. Jolly decent of you —fetching me, don't you know. Nice to see a pal again—three pals, really."

" Oh, quite," agrees Adrian, " quite."

John goes dumb again as Adrian walks him the few yards to the stream ; and his foot is on the first fording-stone before he asks, " I can quite understand that it was a difficult job—but what made you—er—ever imagine that she'd—er—care to come ? "

" She ! " says Adrian, holding out his hand. " Oh, Mary, you mean. Well—well—how *did* I imagine it ? Could it have been because I *asked* her, do you think ; or because Isobel asked

her ; or just because *I* didn't happen to be born deaf, dumb, blind —*and* a congenital idiot."

And before John can put any more questions, Adrian has disappeared.

§4

The baboons have ceased their barking by the time John Masterson reaches his own tent ; but the night-birds are still calling to their mates. And there is nothing congenitally idiotic about those night-birds ; nothing congenitally idiotic about anything in Nature—except himself. "Why the devil didn't I hold my tongue?" he keeps thinking. "I *am* a congenital idiot. Nobody except a congenital idiot would have asked Adrian that question *I* asked him at the ford. And fancy *his* knowing—when I didn't. And fancy *her* coming three thousand miles to Motee Mamotee. And fancy her *being* in Motee Mamotee—down there—just down there . . ."

At that—his thoughts dithering a little—he starts to undress. But the undressing takes a deuce of a time ; and the Lord knows how long it is before he slips on that old *chamma* of Ras Tafari's giving and steps out into the night.

The moon is down ; the night still, star-dusted. Sound carries from the river ; but no sound—not even a pony-whinny —from the camp. A night for thought, for contemplation. Then why can't he think—why can he only see pictures?

And the pictures are so queer. Golden! Everything's golden—England, Africa, the present, the future, even the past. For the past means nothing—only a preparation—a preparation for the things-to-be. A lesson perhaps? Yes—that's it—a lesson. Even Irene has been only a lesson—and his renunciation of Koro's daughter, who killed that folly about "natural man."

So Masterson, seeing his pictures . . .

Then the pictures fade, leaving only one picture—a picture of Mary—a composite picture, blent of many Marys : of the Mary who comes to him out of the tent ; and the Mary who goes with him to Thameside South ; and the Mary who works for him at Carlton House Terrace ; and the Mary of the saw-bench at Lipstone ; and the Mary he meets when he is on leave ; and the first Mary, the schoolgirl Mary, the Mary of that very old dream.

Yes. A Mary-picture. And in all that Mary-picture is something of love, something of longing—and yet—and yet, something of self-reproach.

All these years it has taken him—all these years to realize

Mary—to realize how fine she is, and how lovely, and how ideal a woman. All these years, while he, he . . . And now, as he turns back from the night, John's eyes, too, grow misty—and he, too, knows heart-ache, heart-ache for his own folly, for the years that have been lost to joy.

"The fool I've been," he thinks as he lies sleepless. "And the unkindness of me—letting her work like that—letting her help like that—in the election—at Humblestone Street—at Archer's Rents. Yes—the unkindness of me—taking everything from her—giving nothing—and going away—leaving her more work—double work—letting her shoulder *my* responsibilities—*mine*."

Yet even so, he sleeps that night, and sleeps dreamlessly, till the birds waken him at dawn. And as he wakes self-reproach leaves him—takes bird-wings—flies away. Life's golden again. The lost years vanish. There are no years—only the present—only this glorious present—only to-day.

To-day!

And what a day! The rose-gold dawn-banners are fading—fading from the blue. A breeze is whispering—whispering over Africa. Dear God, this Africa—the water of it, and the air of it—the air that is like wine! Wine? Who wants wine when his heart is thumping—dancing under his breast? What was it Isobel said about early risers? Ah! Then why shouldn't he go down to Mary—go down to her now?

So he goes down to her—and his Waiyatmezis stare at him—and a hammerhead chirps at him—and the solitudes see what solitude has done for him, how the years have fallen from him, and how firm his step is, and how tanned his skin is, and how broad his shoulders, and how keen his eye.

And all this Mary sees as she meets him—meets him instinct-guided—by the ford.

There is a brown man fishing by the ford; and there are white folk watching—watching and chuckling a little from the shelter of a tent. But John and Mary don't know this—and if they did know, they wouldn't mind. For now there is a shyness on them—and a great wonder, as they gaze at one another across the stream. And now Mary thinks, "How silly of me"; and now John thinks, "How silly of me"—till at last they go to one another, just like two children (because Romance makes all of us like children), till at last they meet one another midway of the fording-stones in the stream.

And because it is all so silly and so childish and so heavenly and so completely adorable, Mary can't help laughing at him as

he says to her, " I say, we can't talk here you know. Not really talk to one another. Not in the middle of a stream."

" But we haven't got anything particular to talk about," laughs Mary. And, " Oh, haven't we ? " says John as he leads her over—and she has her only decent pair of white shoes on, and those shoes will be *utterly ruined* if chance upturns a fording-stone—to *his* side of the stream.

And there you must imagine him shy again, and Mary shy too, and silly words between them, and a sentence that ends, " But I *must* talk to you—and you *must* come, because it's the most gorgeous place in the whole of Motee Mamotee, and we'll be back in time for breakfast, and even if we aren't, do you really imagine that Adrian *or* Isobel will care."

And after that, you must imagine them going up—up and up among the granite cliffs—not by the path that leads to John's camp, but by another—by the path that leads to the " most gorgeous place in the whole of Motee Mamotee "—to a ledge wherefrom, looking down, they can see all the sun-flecked shadows shot and inter-shot with kingfisher colours and dove colours and pigeon colours and the green and red and orange of the jungle parrots and the deep electric blue of the giant swallowtails whose pupæ are hanging from the rock.

But of course they aren't looking down at all. They're looking at one another. And John has dropped his topee, because a man can't propose in a topee. And Mary hasn't even thought to put on a topee—not even a thin sun-hat to hide the glory of her hair.

And seeing that long gold hair of hers, John can't remember a single one of those many Marys he remembered last night—neither the Lipstone Mary, nor the Carlton House Terrace Mary, nor the Mary of his war-days, nor even the Mary of his school-boy-dream. Because to-day he doesn't want dreams ; he only wants this Mary, the flesh-and-blood Mary whom travel has fined a little and Africa has paled a little—this flesh-and-blood Mary of the wondrous hands, and the wondrous body, and the steady tender eyes.

Perhaps, in the days to come, this Mary will be all England to him, all his high hopes for England, and all his great dreams for England, and all his steadfast courage for England, and all—because without this is no courage—his fear. But to-day, you must see her—even as he is seeing her—only for his woman, his flesh-and-blood love-woman, for the Eve who comes to him after Lilith, so that he never more remembers Lilith, because this woman becomes all things to him, playmate, comrade, wife and

mistress ; joy and sorrow, tears and laughter, love and longing, mother, mate.

It's all in that, you know, all in the one word " mate " ; and perhaps John Masterson knows it too, as he stands looking at her, looking into her tender eyes. But he can't tell her so, because he isn't a poet—only a dumb poet—the kind of poet for whom the other poets sing. He can only say, " I love you—I love you—I want you to marry me," using exactly the same words that Heaven knows how many hundred million other Englishmen have used before.

And because Mary is also English, she can't say very much either ; only try to make a joke of it—something about being a " bad secretary," and " leaving things to look after themselve when Adrian told her she ought to come out." And even if Mary could say more, John wouldn't let her, because he wants her, wants to go to her, wants her kisses, wants to take her in his arms.

And when he does go to her (and it's about fifteen inches he has to go by this time) and when he does kiss her, and when he does take her in his arms—why, then, you needn't use any more of your imagination about either of them, unless you happen to be one of those superior people who don't believe in Romance. And, by the way, if you do happen to be one of those superior people, then may whatever-gods-you-believe-there-be help you —because no human being can.

§ 5

Talking of superior people, though, Major Adrian Rose—who is a little given to superiority since he added M.P. to his D.S.O. —thinks I ought to add two curtain-speeches.

One of these, which he himself spoke, a day or two later when they rode out across the elephant-grass, " They're going back to the biggest job in the world, my dear—the job of doing other people a little bit of good," seems somewhat apposite.

But the other, delivered by the same speaker to a not entirely sober company, as they sat over the last of the wedding-breakfast in the big yet over-crowded tiffin-room of the British Legation at Addis Ababa, was of such flamboyant length that I've had to cut it out.

And besides, didn't Mary Masterson blush, adorably, right up to the roots of her unshingled hair, at that tremendous peroration which began : " And now I'm going to ask you to drink to their future ; because it isn't only their future : but

ours. They're the best we breed, you know—symbols of that best, anyway—though I don't suppose they'll either of them like my calling them symbols. And if only the best we breed can join forces, why then old England's next generation . . ."

A tactless devil, this Adrian Rose. But sincere.

THE END

London, England.

May, 1924—*November*, 1925.

PRINTED BY THE ANCHOR PRESS, LTD., TIPTREE, ESSEX, ENGLAND.

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